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„I don't like it - let's call it 'fake' – The Content and Consequences of the Fake News Debate“

verfasst von / submitted by

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For my Father

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Content

I. Introduction

"Language is never innocent."

Roland Barthes, 1953

The pervasiveness of mis- and disinformation in many democracies is receiving massive attention by the media, politics, science, and citizens. While already recognized as societal risk in 2013 (World Economics Forum, 2013), it was only in the past five years that it has become "*the* defining political communication topic of our time" (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 145; see also Bennett & Livingston 2018b). At the same time, openly challenging the truthfulness of factual information and presenting opinions as equal to empirical evidence has become an integral part of political debates (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017). This has led to heightened uncertainty within the public about what is true and what is false (Chambers, 2017; Newman, 2018; 2019). In other words, post-factual relativism gained traction in political communication, developing into one of the central concerns of the field (Van Aelst et al., 2017). To reflect these trends, the *Oxford Dictionaries* named the term "post-truth" its 2016 Word of the Year (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). During this time, another phrase rose to prominence: "fake news."

While fake news once described forms of political satire or political parody (Baym, 2005), in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election it was used in a new context. Mostly, journalists (Silverman, 2016) employed the term to describe the rise of completely manufactured news stories that were widely circulated online regarding the then presidential candidates. Stories about Hillary Clinton's alleged involvement in a child pornography ring ("pizzagate") or about the Pope's endorsement of Donald Trump as President received a lot of attention (e.g., Lopez, 2016; Silverman, 2016). As most of these messages favored Donald Trump, concerns about their potential influence on the outcome of the election were prevalent (Pew Research Center, 2016) and scientific literature on the spread and consequences of fake

news quickly emerged (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2017; 2018; Vosoughi, et al. 2018).

However, in December 2016, fake news was given yet another meaning when newly elected US President Donald Trump started using "fake news" to tweet about news media e.g., (The New York Times, 2019). Famously, in his first press conference in 2017, he denied *CNN* reporter John Acosta a question stating, "No, I'm not going to give you a question. You're fake news" (Wendling, 2018). Subsequently, he repeatedly used this phrase to discredit opposing news brands and the media in general (e.g., Lischka, 2019; Meeks, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2018). In 2018, he even awarded "fake news awards" to outlets that reported critically about his presidency (Kirby & Nelsen, 2017. As fake news was previously connected to the spread of disinformation, it already had an inherently negative and dangerous connotation (Kurtzleben, 2017), which arguably rendered it an attractive means to undermine news media. Quickly, countless political leaders around the world followed Trumps' example and employed fake news as a way to delegitimize critical journalism (Reporters without Borders, 2017; The New York Times, 2019).

As a result, fake news evolved into a heated and omnipresent debate, or a "global panic" (McNair, 2018, p. 74), that subsumed fears about the prevalence and effects of untrue information in the contemporary political communication environment. The ubiquitous use of fake news in various contexts loosely connected to falsehood, arguably rendered the phrase meaningless. Due to the lack of an agreed-upon meaning, as well as the way politicians used it as a political strategy to defame opposing news outlets, fake news quickly received considerable criticism. Some journalistic and scientific actors even called for resigning from using the term in public discourses altogether (e.g., Sullivan, 2017; Wardle, 2017) and the UK government even banned it from official documents (Murphy 2018, para. 2). Scholarly criticism of fake news relates mainly to the fact that the phrase is not adequate in capturing the whole spectrum of false content. Instead the already existing concepts of misinformation (i.e., misleading or

false information where the intent is unknown) and disinformation (i.e., misleading or false information that is spread intentionally) are seen as more useful for political communication research (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020; HLEG, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

However, in spite of this major criticism, fake news remained a vital object of scholarly interest (e.g., Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018), an essential rhetorical device in politicians' communication (Lischka, 2019), a prominent buzzword in journalists' coverage (McNair, 2018), and highly popular in citizens' conversations (Brummette et al., 2018). It sparked a salient debate about uncertainty and doubts not only about the accuracy of available information, but also about which sources to trust. This debate about a sticky phenomenon that was considered meaningless by some and impactful and dangerous by others, is the point of departure of this dissertation. More specifically, the present dissertation argues that fake news *does* require scholarly investigation. However, not as a replacement of the useful concepts of "misinformation" or "disinformation." Instead, I argue that fake news adds a crucial factor to the challenge of disinformation: a threat to journalistic legitimacy; that is, a threat to the public acceptance of journalism's authority in the production and dissemination of credible information (e.g., Carlson, 2016a; Tong, 2015; 2018; Ward, 2004).

Prior to 2016, the problem of misinformation and disinformation was connected to several actors and online communication in general (World Economic Forum, 2013), rather than to the machinations of a particular group of actors. However the rise of fake news *put the media at the center of this debate* in two ways. First, fake news describes disinformation that exploits a journalistic format in order to achieve credibility and perceived truthfulness (e.g., Tandoc, 2019). Thereby, journalistic credibility as a general concept gets undermined, and uncertainty is created as to which media products are still to be trusted. This is what I consider a *passive* undermining of journalistic legitimacy by fake news. Second, politicians have leveraged fake news – as well as the worries connected to it – as an effective political strategy

with at least three goals: 1) to discredit critical news coverage, 2) to erode public perceptions in news media, and 3) to undermine the democratic foundations of journalism by connecting restrictions on press freedom to the fight against fake news and disinformation (Neo, 2020; Reporters without Borders, 2017). I label this the *active* undermining of journalistic legitimacy by fake news.

Despite the immense attention fake news received and its previously described potentially harmful consequences for journalism, it remains unclear *what fake news is (RQ1), how it is used (RQ2), and what its consequences are (RQ3)*. These are the questions that motivated this multi-method, cumulative dissertation and will be examined in detail in Chapters 5-8.

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 will outline an extensive theoretical framework. There, I first discuss the notion of "post-truth" or "post-factual" relativism (Chambers, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Salgado, 2018; 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017), which describes the political atmosphere that facilitated the rise of fake news. In the second part of this chapter, I explore said emergence of fake news in more detail, outlining the gaps that this dissertation fills. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodical considerations of the empirical studies (Chapters 6-8). More specifically, Chapter 3 elaborates on the advantages and disadvantages of using content analyses to understand how fake news is used (Chapters 6 and 7) and of using an experimental approach to examine its consequences (Chapter 8). It furthermore describes Austria and Germany as the country case for this research. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the four studies on which this dissertation is based.

The four research articles build on each other (as visualized in Figure 1). Specifically, Chapter 5 is a conceptual study addressing the first research question (*What is fake news?*) Based on an extensive research review, it provides a comprehensive definition of fake news, which is the basis of this dissertation. The following two chapters provide insights from content analyses that consider how *fake news is used (RQ2)* by journalists (Chapter 6) and politicians

(Chapter 7). Chapter 8 is an experimental study that investigates *the consequences of fake news (RQ3*) on citizens. Finally, in Chapter 9, I will conclude with a discussion of the overall results and their implications for the use of concepts in communication science, the role of journalistic reporting for politicized debates, and the study of political communication strategies.

Chapter		Approach	Title	Status	Journal
Definition (RQ1)	5	Conceptual Paper	Fake News as Two-Dimensional Phenomenon. A Framework and Research Agenda	Published	*Annals of the International Communication Association*
Usage (RQ2)	6	Content Analysis	From Novelty to Normalization? How Journalists Use the Term "Fake News" in their Reporting	Published	*Journalism Studies*
Usage (RQ2)	7	Content Analysis	Delegitimizing the media? Analyzing politicians' media criticism on social media	Published	*Journal of Language and Politics*
Consequences (RQ3)	8	Survey Experiment	The Differential Effects of Disinformation Accusations on (Populist) Citizens	R&R	*Journal of Communication*

Figure 1. Overview of Dissertation

Chapter I

II. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is divided into two major sections. First, I embed my dissertation into the relevant social context, namely the notion of "post-truth" or "post-factual" relativism, thereby explaining *why* the term "fake news" plays such a central role in political discourses. This is then followed by an exploration of the emerging literature on fake news, where I outline the research gaps that motivated the specific studies of this cumulative dissertation.

1. Setting the Scene: A Time of Post-Factual Relativism

1.1. What Is Post-Factual Relativism?

The rise of fake news is deeply connected to the notion of post-factual or post-truth relativism, which I will explain in this section. However, before doing so, it is essential to note that in this thesis, I use deliberative democratic theory as the normative background, which values accuracy, justification, and respect as criteria for political communication (Chambers, 2017; Dryzek et al., 2019; Freelon, 2015; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020).

Post-factual relativism describes a development in which facts are increasingly reduced to a matter of opinion, empirical evidence is disregarded, and mis- and disinformation prevail in political discourses (e.g., Farkas & Schou, 2019). In recent years, it has gained traction in political communication, almost developing to one of the central concerns of the field (Van Aelst, et al., 2017). However, the central idea of post-factual relativism is not uncontested. Critics argue that the modifier "post" in post-truth or post-fact suggests that previously there was an era of truth and facts in politics and media (Carlson, 2018; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Levitin, 2019; McNair, 2018). However, quite obviously, the strategic use of false information

and outright lies is arguably as old as politics itself (Arendt, 1967; Higgins, 2016; Salgado, 2021). Furthermore, truth itself is, of course, a contested concept, and there is a long history of different actors claiming to have authority over its definition, involving religious, political, scientific, judicial, and media institutions (e.g., Katz & Mays, 2019; Waisbord, 2018a). In fact, in some philosophical views, such as post-modernism, the existence or observability of truth, and by extension reality, is denied in part or even completely (Salgado, 2018).

Truth is not a singular, stable, or final entity but is most likely established by social consensus (Schudson, 2019, p. 33). More importantly, in common understandings of democracy, such as Habermasian ideas of deliberative democracy (e.g., 1989), truth, or at least the justification of argumentation and the assumption of its correctness, is a central element of healthy debates and democratic processes (e.g., Chambers, 2017; Friedland & Hove, 2016). While Habermas is more concerned with the processes of finding empirical truths (Chambers, 2017), we can adapt a more pragmatic viewpoint, where there are assertions that can be intersubjectively classified as true or false due to proper justification, independent of personal, religious, moral, or ideological attitudes (e.g., Schudson, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017). For example, we can determine that there is no scientific evidence for the claim that vaccines cause autism (e.g., Kata, 2010). We can also say that Obama was born in the US (e.g., Crawford, & Bhatia, 2012), and that the turnout at his inauguration in 2009 was larger than Trump's inauguration crowd in 2017 (e.g., Time, 2017). Thus, truth "refers to epistemic robustness" (Chambers, 2017, p. 154) and while it is established as social consensus, this "consensus [is] constrained by conditions of reality" (Schudson, 2019, p. 25).

This understanding of truth, which I adopt in my dissertation, naturally excludes the possibility of postulating one's own opinions or preferences as factual and true. Yet, while opinions and preferences serve as important drivers in political debates, they are increasingly described through truth terminology. Research has shown that political actors in public discourse downgrade once agreed-upon facts to opinions, while offering misinformation using

the term "alternative facts," thereby elevating both to the same value (e.g., Hameleers & Minihold, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

This, of course, does not mean that there is no longer *any* truth (Salgado, 2018). I am also not suggesting that there is now *less* truth than before (see also Chambers, 2017; Farkas & Schou, 2019). Instead, and important in the context of my dissertation, the notion of post-truth or post-fact refers to an atmosphere characterized by utmost uncertainty about whether it is *even possible* and thus worthwhile to identify accurate information needed for political decision-making (see also Chambers, 2017; McKay & Tenove, 2020).

As a result, there are multiple, contradictory versions of truth that receive similar levels of acceptance: separate groups define their own reality based on personal beliefs rather than established facts and "objective" evidence (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Salgado, 2018; 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018a). While not new, misinformation and intentional disinformation are created and disseminated with more ease in a digital political information environment (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2017); increasingly equally valued to information stemming from rigorous research in both science and journalism, based on long-agreed epistemologies[i] (Salgado, 2018; McNair, 2018). This means that the previously described social consensus, where reality interpretations by political, scientific, and journalistic institutions are accepted, is declining (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McNair, 2018; Salgado, 2018; 2021).

This is notwithstanding the observation that politicians (and journalists or scientists) have, of course, been found to actually lie before. However, scholars note that today the public tolerance of apparent lies and "outright denials of facts is shockingly high" (Higgins, 2016, p. 9). While, for example, Richard Nixon's lies were ostracized (ibid.), Donald Trump's inaccurate allegations are met with indifference by many (e.g., Higgins, 2016; Nyhan et al., 2020; Swire et al., 2017; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020b).

All this renders post-factual relativism highly consequential for contemporary deliberative democracy. If misinformation is equally valued as empirical evidence, informed democratic decision-making as described by Habermas and many others is endangered. Furthermore, if public actors cannot agree on basic facts, democratic discourse becomes practically impossible (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; McKay & Tenove, 2020; Salgado, 2018; 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

In the following, I explore some developments that connect to the notion of post-truth or post-factual relativism, within the central pillars of political communication. More specifically, I argue how political, media-related, and psychological trends have likely supported the growing uncertainty about (political) truth. First, I argue that increasing political polarization, as well as the rise of populism, fueled a divided perception of reality. Next, I posit that changes in the political information environment have eroded journalism's hegemony as a main source of information. Lastly, I explore some of the psychological processes that explain why citizens select and believe misinformation. Of course, this does not represent an exhaustive analysis of the emergence of post-factual relativism, but provides a background for the specific phenomenon studied in this dissertation, namely the rise of fake news (for additional overviews see Farkas & Schou, 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Salgado, 2018).

1.2. Post-Factual Relativism and Political Change

Conceptualizations of reality, of what is considered true and false is increasingly divided by political ideology. Among other developments, two political changes have driven this binary division of truth in particular, namely *political polarization* and the rise of *populism* (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018b). Political polarization, in the most general sense, describes a divide between political parties or citizens over political

issues or their affect toward each other (e.g., Lelkes, 2016). Populism is considered a "thin ideology" (Mudde, 2004), at whose core lies a binary perception of society, distinguishing between "the good" people and the "evil" elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). So, at the heart of both phenomena lies an "us. vs. them" logic. When conflict between these groups is heightened, post-factual relativism leads to questions of what is truth to become ideologically laden. Each group holds on to their own truth, while denying the out-group's truth (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018b). In extreme cases, using arguments independent of their veracity can be considered legitimate and fair when it bolsters the ingroup's view of reality (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019, p. 84).

1.2.1 Truth Has Become Ideological in Polarized Democracies

At present, political polarization is one of the most studied concepts in political science and political communication research (see Barbéra (2020) for an overview). The literature roughly distinguishes between ideological and affective polarization (Mason, 2015). *Ideological polarization* (sometimes called attitude polarization), (e.g. Lelkes, 2016) refers to a growing divergence between political groups based on their views on topics and policies (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lelkes, 2018). There is clear evidence that especially in the US, political elites are increasingly separated on issues or policies (Hetherington, 2009; Dalton, 2008; Prior, 2013).

Affective polarization, on the other hand, proposes that individuals are less divided by policy than by affect (Iyengar et al., 2012) and stresses that citizens increasingly perceive themselves and members of their partisan ingroup positively, while they view members of the partisan outgroup(s) more negatively (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Lelkes, 2016; Reiljan, 2020). This understanding of polarization is rooted in *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which stresses that citizens not only have individual but also social identities. That is, in certain situations, people identify themselves as part of a social group, for example, as part of a political party, rather than as an individual. This

social group, one's in-group, is then distinguished from the out-group(s), which one is not part of. Furthermore, social identity theory entails social comparison, an us. vs. them logic, in which citizens attempt to compare the in-group more favorably than the out-group(s) (Tajfel & Turner 1976).

Most research on polarization focuses on a US context (Barberá, 2020), which is – together with other two-party systems – particularly prone to polarization (e.g., Prior, 2013). However, polarization also occurs in multi-party systems (e.g.; Humprecht et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020). Furthermore, polarization does not only occur along partisan lines (Boyer, 2021; Van Proijen, 2021), but also among opinion-based groups, i.e., identity-groups that are defined by shared opinions on a specific issue or significant political event (Hobolt et al., 2020). For example, during the Brexit Referendum in 2016, British citizens formed strong identities as Leavers or Remainers, which transcended traditional party lines (ibid.). Importantly for this dissertation, polarization also transcends to media attitudes. For example, in the US, Democrats and Republicans are strongly divided in their trust in the mainstream press (Guess et al., 2017), where Democratic citizens value legacy news outlets much higher than Republican voters. Furthermore, citizens increasingly follow distinctive media diets based on their political ideology, which might result in different interpretations of reality (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

A conventional view in the literature is that polarization increased through the rise of high-choice media landscape (Lelkes et al., 2015; Prior, 2013; Stroud, 2010; 2011). The assumption is that partisan media selectivity and algorithmic filtering lead to homogenous social networks, so called echo-chambers (Sunstein, 2001) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) in which people are primary exposed to information that does not challenge their (partisan) beliefs while cross-cutting news exposure is rare. Recent empirical studies, however, offer a more nuanced view, showing that only a small share of the population might actually be exposed only to likeminded information (see Barbéra, 2020; Geiß et al, 2021; Möller, 2021; Zuiderveen-Borgesius et al. 2016). For the majority of people, cross-cutting news exposure is not less

common on social media than in offline settings, and algorithmic news ranking does not have as devastating an impact on polarization as often feared (Barbéra, 2020).

Of course, political polarization is not all bad; to some degree it is necessary in democracy. Specifically, a certain degree of ideological polarization indicates that political parties offer distinct positions, from which citizens can choose, which is important for civic engagement (e.g., Levendusky, 2009; Barbéra, 2020). However, if groups grow so deeply divided that their worldviews are incompatible, it can have harmful consequences and even endanger stable democracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). For example, when partisans are divided in their views about global threats, such as the existence of climate change (as it is the case in the US, see McCright & Dunlap, 2011), it hinders society's risk management.

Furthermore, affective polarization might lead to scenarios where political discourse is not based on arguments and evidence but on identities (Barbéra, 2020). When affective polarization reaches the level where political rivals no longer tolerate each other but perceive each other as threats, they might "grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 97). Thereby, political polarization can affect the value of truth in political communication.

For example, winning at all costs might include the abandonment of truth-telling to reach political goals and the deliberate use of falsehoods to deceive the outgroup. Connected to that, if the electorate is highly polarized, they might believe lies by their favored politicians over factual information by opposing sources (e.g., Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). In line with that, research shows that when partisans learn that they have been exposed to misinformation by a politician they support, they might correct their beliefs; however, they do not change their perception of said politician (e.g., Nyhan et al., 2020; Swire et al., 2017; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020b).

1.2.2 Truth as a Rhetorical Device in Populism

Populism can be seen as "a closely related, yet conceptually distinct manifestation of political polarization" (Van Pooijen, 2021, p. x). As mentioned before, populism also entails the aforementioned us vs. them logic. That is, it emphasizes a binary view of society, where the in-group of ordinary but "good" people is opposed to morally inferior out-groups. The "pure" people are a homogenous group with the same interests, norms and values. They are endangered by the influences of the "evil" elite and sometimes other societal out-groups (Hameleers, 2021; Mudde, 2004). Therefore, in line with social identity theory, populism pushes positive self-identification with the in-group and demarcation from the outgroup(s) (Bos et al., 2020). Central to populist communication is the attribution of blame to the outgroup. That is, the elites (or other outgroups) are blamed for the suffering of the people, while the people are absolved of any responsibility (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2017).

The core idea of populism (i.e., the binary divide between the people and one or several out-groups) can be combined with various political views (Mudde, 2004). Right-wing populism adds nativism, which separates the good people not only from the elites, but also non-natives, i.e., refugees and immigrants. In left-wing populism, the economic elites are considered a particular dangerous outgroup (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Engesser, et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007)

Crucial to this dissertation, populism's polarized view of society transcends to its perception of truth. That is, from a populist perspective, "truth does not exist outside political ideology" (Waisbord, 2018b, p. 26). Instead, there is the people's truth opposed to the lies of the elites. This renders the possibility of producing commonly held facts and a shared reality impossible (ibid.). Importantly, the anti-elitism inherent in populist ideology can entail a rejection of facts and truth established by experts and elite institutions, such as science (Mede & Schäfer, 2020) and media (Fawzi, 2020). From a populist perspective, instead of serving the

public's interest, many scientists and journalists conspire with the political elite in betrayal of the people (Fawzi, 2020; Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

Thus, populist communication frequently entails blame attributions to (elite) sources of expert knowledge, in which these actors are accused of manufacturing "facts" and "reality" to fit a political goal (Hameleers, 2021). For example, attacks against mainstream media, such as *Lügenpresse* (German; translates to lying press) allegations, are a longstanding part of populist political rhetoric (Aalberg et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2020; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Krämer, 2018). This anti-elite or anti-expert stance is also mirrored in populist citizens' perceptions of science (Eberl et al., 2021) and news media (Fawzi, 2018; Mitchell, et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2018).

This anti-elite rhetoric can flourish in the current-day media environment, as populist politicians voice their attacks on experts predominantly on social media. Even more so than for non-populist political actors, social media is a key communication tool for populists, as it allows them to speak directly to the people which is congruent with their ideational core (Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2021; de Vreese et al., 2018). On social media, populists can distribute attacks on and discreditations of news media and other experts and communicate counternarratives that would have not bypassed journalistic gatekeeping (Dunaway, 2021; Hameleers, 2021).

Of course, as an institution of power, the media (and other expert information sources) can and should be criticized when necessary. That is, media criticism is important to reflect on journalistic fulfillment of norms and quality criteria (e.g., Cheruiyot, 2019; Wyatt, 2007; 2019). However, in contrast to healthy media criticism, the goal of populist criticism seems not to be an actual evaluation of journalism's performance and quality, but rather a strategy to "delegitimize the epistemic status of expert knowledge and empirical evidence whilst legitimizing support for counternarratives and alternative truth claims" (Hameleers, 2021, p. 31; see also Fawzi, 2020; Lischka, 2019). This hinders a democratic debate which is

characterized by respect for different political positions and reasoned argumentation to arrive at legitimate decisions (e.g., Dryzek et al., 2019; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

To summarize, the current political climate, characterized by increasing polarization and populism, promotes a divided perception of truth and is thus a fertile breeding ground for post-factual relativism.

1.3. Post-Factual Relativism and a Changing Media Environment

One assertion of post-factual relativism research in political communication is that journalisms hegemonic position in defining what is true has been eroded in recent years (Waisbord, 2018a; Salgado, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Of course, journalism is not the only institution that once held an exclusive status in the construction of reality: politics and science were also integral parts of this hegemony (Katz & Mays, 2019; Van Aelst, et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). However, in the scope of this dissertation, I will focus on the role of journalism specifically (and here I focus on political news, thereby excluding opinion, lifestyle, and entertainment journalism).

Providing citizens with true information, and thereby allowing them to make informed political decisions, is a guiding principle of journalism (Broersma, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Strömbäck, 2005; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). This principle is intended to be accomplished through the process of gathering and verifying facts, and reporting these in a neutral and objective manner (Broersma, 2010; Carlson, 2018; Waisbord, 2018a). Certainly, journalism's claims to truth and objectivity have been contested (e.g., Broersma, 2010; Goldstein, 2007). That is, journalistic truth is always affected by various factors influencing the process of news production, such as news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965;

Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; 2017), editorial policies (e.g., De Vreese, 2005), personal biases, lying sources and misunderstandings (Goldstein, 2007; McNair, 2018; Salgado, 2018). In sum, journalistic (and human) truth-seeking is always characterized by fallibility (e.g., McNair, 2018; Schudson, 2018).

Today, however, even uncontested truth claims have been hard to preserve (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Salgado, 2018; 2021; Waisbord, 2018a). In the past century, journalism provided information in a more hierarchical way: there were fewer, more trusted outlets whose coverage barely deviated from each other (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Today, citizens in many countries across the globe live with a so-called "hybrid" media environment, offering myriad sources, channels, and interpretations (e.g., Chadwick, 2017; Metzger et al., 2003). A hybrid media system is a conceptualization of a high-choice media landscape, where new and old media types coexist and evolve through interactions of newer and older media logic[1] (Chadwick, 2017). This presents a number of challenges to the acceptance of journalism's truth claim.

First, it has challenged the *truth producing* role of journalism. Through online platforms and social media networks, news production and distribution has been opened to a wide variety of actors, resulting in heightened competition for audience attention (e.g., Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2019; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Among other things, this has increased economic pressure for traditional news media (e.g., Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020), as advertising revenues that once funded news media are now heavily dominated by large technology companies, resulting in great financial loss to journalism and in particular, newspaper journalism (Hamilton 2004; Humprecht et al., 2020; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020; Tambini, 2017). During the past two decades, many news organizations have had to cut jobs; several outlets have had to close down completely; and particularly investigative reporting,

[1] That is, technological, normative, behavioral, stylistic, and organizational characteristics of media (Chadwick, 2017)

which has upheld the highest professional standards of journalism, has been downsized (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020; Tong, 2017).

Second, it has challenged the *truth gatekeeping* function of journalism. When news is produced by everyone and everywhere, traditional journalism no longer acts as the sole gatekeeper of information. Instead, it competes with citizens, alternative and partisan news outlets, as well as other political actors (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Carlson, 2018; Hameleers, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). These new gatekeepers of information enable the production and rise of counternarratives to journalistic claims – sometimes consisting of misinformation – which can be spread more easily than ever before (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Dunaway, 2021; Salgado, 2018). Journalists are now gatewatchers only, no longer in exclusively charge of what reaches a wider public on a given issue (e.g., Pearson & Kosicki, 2017).

Third, journalists are challenged in their *epistemologies* or in how they verify truth. While online and social media content has become an increasingly important source for journalism (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; Tylor, 2015), new digital technologies also present a challenge to journalistic verification. Additional skills are necessary to verify online information, such as knowledge about search engine algorithms or geo-locations (see e.g., Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). At the same time, news cycles have been accelerating, leaving journalists increasingly overwhelmed with verifying the sheer abundance of inaccurate information (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al., 2016; Lecheler & Kruikemeier; 2016; Van Leuven et al., 2018).

Lastly, the *overall claim* journalists have to veracity is challenged. Arguably, criticism of the function of journalism and accuracy of its narratives has increased (Carlson, 2016b; 2018; Wyatt, 2019). This criticism comes from different sources. This trend started in the strongly polarized news media system of the US, where liberal and conservative partisan news media accuse each other from partisan bias in their reporting (Jamieson & Capella, 2010; Ladd, 2012).

It was further strengthened by the emergence of hyper-partisan digital news outlets such as Breitbart and *unzensuriert.at*, that seek to completely undermine the authority of legacy media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Van Dalen, 2019). Through the rise of social media, media criticism has become a common practice of news consumers as well (Carlson, 2016b). Added to this, given the aforementioned social media strategy by some politicians, which entails attacking the media (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Meeks, 2019), media criticism has arguably become the predominant context of news consumption. To put it bluntly, on social media "to consume a news story is to simultaneously consume criticism of that story" (Carlson, 2016b, p. 915, see also Wyatt, 2019).

Thus, journalism's claim on truth telling is strongly contested nowadays. While such critical views on journalism are certainly not new (Ladd, 2012; Watts et al., 1999), the prevalence and intensity of this "discourse of antagonism" (Carlson, 2018, p. 18) that journalism is facing today is unprecedented (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; McNair, 2018). It further renders journalistic truth claims suspicious to a growing part of the population, possibly contributing to a growing distrust toward the press and pushing audiences toward other information sources (Carlson, 2017; 2018).

1.4. The Psychology of Post-Factual Relativism

One of the punchlines of post-truth debates is that many people are actually either unwilling or unable to correctly distinguish true from untrue information and thus hold misperceptions about important social and political issues (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017). This assumption is, however, actually backed up by a myriad of psychological theories and empirical evidence showing that the cognitive process of selecting and evaluating information is unconscious (Lakoff, 2014) and often (politically) biased (e.g., Hendricks & Vestergaard,

2019; Salgado, 2021). This suggests that our mind is, psychologically speaking, fertile ground on which populist and polarizing ideas of "alternative facts" may be spread. In the context of this dissertation, I will briefly touch upon three theories or research areas that are particularly relevant to the case of fake news, namely (1) selective exposure, (2) motivated reasoning, and the (3) dual-process theory.

First, in a hybrid and high-choice media environment, individuals' selection of news is a key factor determining their information diets (Stroud, 2011). In general, people's attention is limited. They can only focus on number of aspects in their environment; therefore, they tend to direct their attention to those aspects that matter most to them (e.g., Stroud, 2017). Relevant in the context of (post-)truth, individuals tend to expose themselves to information that fits their existing beliefs of what is true while avoiding information that might contradict these views (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Klapper, 1969; Stroud, 2010; 2011). One frequently mentioned explanation for *selective exposure* is *cognitive dissonance theory*, which describes an unpleasant mental state in which one's personal views are in conflict with incoming (factual) information (Festinger, 1957; Stroud, 2011).[2] To avoid this uncomfortable mental state, people often select news sources whose coverage likely fits their political views (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Stroud, 2011).

Research has repeatedly provided empirical evidence for this ideological selective exposure (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Stroud, 2011). For example, in the US, conservatives trust and select news from the conservative news outlet, *Fox News*, while they avoid and show less trust in news from liberal news outlets. In the same vein, liberals tend to trust and use outlets such as *CNN* and avoid and distrust *Fox News* (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014). In Europe, research has shown that citizens with strong

[2] See Stroud 2011 (p. 17) for other motivations for selective exposure.

populist attitudes prefer tabloid and entertainment media (Hameleers et al., 2017), while they tend to reject mainstream media (Fawzi, 2018).

Secondly, in situations where individuals, despite their selection biases, are confronted with belief-challenging information, they often engage in biased processing of this information (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019). That is, people tend to uncritically accept mis- and disinformation that is congruent with their ideological predispositions (Flynn et al., 2017) and perceive incongruent correct information as misleading (Hameleers, 2020). As a result, people can hold misperceptions, i.e., "factual beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence in the public domain" (Flynn et al., 2017, p. 127). Prominent examples of such misperceptions are the belief that climate change is either not real, or not human-made (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2015), that MMR-vaccines cause autism (Kata, 2012), or that the coronavirus was created in a Chinese lab (e.g., Druckman et al., 2021).

The formation of these misperceptions can be explained with the process of *motivated reasoning* (Flynn et al., 2017), a psychological concept that explains that humans can have different goals for processing information (Kunda, 1990). On the one hand, accuracy goals can be activated, which entails that people strive for processing information in a detached and factual manner. One the other hand, and arguably more common for human processing of information (Taber & Lodge, 2006), when directional goals are activated, people tend to process information in a way that leads to a preferred conclusion (Kunda, 1990). The latter process is also known *as directional motivated reasoning* (Flynn et al., 2017; Taber & Lodge, 2006). When people engage in directional motivated reasoning, they will more easily believe information that reinforces their views (i.e., confirmation bias) and more strongly counterargue information that contradicts these views (i.e., disconfirmation bias) (Boyer, 2021; Flynn et al., 2017; Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Third, most of the time, human thinking is unconscious and relies on heuristic cues and mental shortcuts which leads to quick assumptions (e.g., Kahneman, 2011; Lakoff, 2014). For

example, when evaluating the quality of news content, people tend to rely more on cues such as the news brand (Urban & Schweiger, 2014) or user comments (Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Prochazaka et al., 2018) than the actual content. When people process information in this rather automatic style, they are less able to deliberate and thus more likely to believe inaccurate information (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; 2021), resulting in the formation of misperceptions.

This can be explained with *dual-process theories* such as *System 1 and System 2 Processing* (Kahneman, 2011),[3] which propose that there are two different modes of processing messages. One is an intuitive, autonomous mode, demanding little cognitive effort (System 1); the other is analytic and deliberative, associated with a more careful examination of given arguments (System 2). Humans tend to avoid the more cognitive demanding processing style (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). For example, Lakoff (2009; 2014) estimates that about 98% of our thinking is not conscious; rather, it is automatic and uncontrolled. In this processing state (System 1), humans heavily rely on mental frames, shortcuts or heuristic cues, such as the number of arguments, source or familiarity with the content when evaluating information (Lakoff, 2008; 2014; Kahneman, 2011; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Xu, 2017). Misperceptions are thus easily formed, based on heuristic cues rather than conscious deliberation.

Research suggests that, once formed, misperceptions are difficult to correct (Flynn et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Walter & Tukachinsky, 2019). For example, studies have shown a "continued influence" of misperceptions. That is, sometimes people's opinions are still affected by misinformation, even after its correction (e.g., Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Moreover, in some instances, corrections can even backfire, reinforcing false beliefs instead of updating to correct beliefs (Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020; but see Swire-Thompson et al., 2020a; Wood & Porter, 2019).

[3] Also known as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)

In summary, the formation of misperceptions can be explained by the fact that human selection and processing of information is mostly unconscious and driven by heuristic cues and directional motivations to confirm existing (political) attitudes.

2. The Rise of Fake News

The previous section explored the notion of post-factual relativism in a changed information environment, in which perceptions of truth are polarized and politicized, the news media have lost their hegemony in reality construction, and citizens are vulnerable to mis- and disinformation. In the following section, I will situate the phenomenon of fake news alongside this notion of post-truth public discourse, media, and citizens. After providing a conceptual clarification of the term, I then discuss the role of fake news in a political, media, and citizen context.

2.1. What is Fake News?

Fake news has been increasingly used by different actors to describe different things. Thus, it has been labeled a “fluid descriptor” (Carlson, 2020, p. 380) and “floating signifier” (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p. 298) to express that its meaning is dependent on the context in which it is used. It has been criticized for not having any conceptual value and not being appropriate to describe the whole scope of different types of untrue content (HLEG, 2017; Freelon &Wells, 2020; Wardle, 2017). Many scholars refrained from using it in their research (HLEG: 2017). However, fake news has remained a prominent part of public discourse (e.g., Farhall et al.,

2019; Wright, 2021b) and scientific literature during the past five years (for overviews see Lazer et al., 2019 Tandoc, 2019; 2021).

This dissertation argues that fake news requires closer scrutiny for at least two reasons. First, and I will elaborate on this point in Section 2.1.1, I argue that fake news has some conceptual value after all, which distinguishes it from the broader concepts of misinformation and disinformation. Second, and more importantly, because it has become an ubiquitous buzzword in political discussions with potentially negative consequences. Political language shapes the way we think. For example, as explained before most thinking is unconscious. That is, human knowledge is organized mental structures, so-called "conceptual frames" or mental concepts (Lakoff, 2014; Wehling, 2017). These frames become activated through language and get stronger with each repetition (Ewoldsen & Rhodes, 2020; Wyler, 2004), resulting in what we consider "common sense" (Lakoff, 2009; 2014). If words are used repeatedly in political discourse, people likely form strong frames connected to these words. These frames, in turn, influence human thinking, as well as behavior (Lakoff, 2014; Wehling, 2017). Therefore, politicians often use very specific language to influence citizens' attitudes (ibid.). For example, saying "Refugees are *flooding* Europe" is framing the arrival of refugees as a flood, a natural disaster, which is perceived as threat and therefore might elicit negative attitudes (Wehling, 2017, p. 136). While the phrase "fake news" is ambiguous, it is perceived negative, as falsehood, and maybe even as threat (e.g., Kurtzleben, 2017). When it is used to speak about news media, it might thus evoke negative reactions.

Therefore, frequently used and politicized buzzwords, such as fake news, might be quite consequential, especially when used to frame the media. Thus, this dissertation suggests that there is a crucial need to understand *What is fake news?* (*RQ1*). This question is answered in detail in Chapter 5; however, to be able to outline the subsequent research gaps and questions that have motivated this dissertation, I briefly introduce this dissertation's conceptualization of fake news at this point.

2.1.1 Fake News is a Distinct Form of Disinformation

Fake news is a *form of disinformation* (e.g., Lazer et al., 2019, Tandoc et al., 2018). Disinformation is a *broad* category describing false, inaccurate, or misleading information types that are created and/or spread intentionally to deceive the public (Tucker et al., 2018). This intentionality is what distinguishes disinformation from misinformation, which is spread without intention, or for which no intention has yet been detected (e.g., HLEG; 2017). From a linguistic perspective, the intentionality of fake news is embedded in the modifier "fake" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). A fake does not have the primary function of its original, but instead is *intended* to mislead someone into thinking that it does (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). For example, "a fake Louis Vuitton bag is not a product of a manufacturing process gone wrong. It is a product of a thoughtful, intentional, and usually meticulous copying of its authentic, original counterpart" (Tandoc, 2021, p. 113). This illustrates the difference between *false* news and *fake* news: Journalists frequently make mistakes in their coverage – for example because they do not have enough time to fact-check statements or because they misinterpret events (McNair, 2018). Retracting *false* news stories is a common practice in journalism. However, these stories are not duplicating an original; therefore, they are not fake (McNair, 2018; Tandoc, 2021).

What makes fake news a specific type of disinformation is its *journalistic design*. Fake news mimics the inverted pyramid format of news, using a title, text body, and pictures (Horne & Adali, 2016; Tandoc et al., 2021). Furthermore, these stories frequently feature (fabricated) quotes, and links to others sources. Often information is even distributed from sources that imitate actual news brands (Chadwick, 2017; Horne & Adali, 2016). Through exploiting the design of real news, which is supposed to be normatively based on truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Tandoc et al., 2018), fake news simulates truth-seeking, fact-checking, and, objectivity, while it its goal is to deceive the public for political or financial purposes (e.g., Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019, Mourão & Robertson, 2019; Tandoc, 2021).

Thus, this means that fake news is indeed not an appropriate phrase to capture disinformation in general and should not be used that way. Instead, it describes a very specific *genre* of disinformation that exploits "the credibility and legitimacy that the public has associated with the language, format, and feel of real news" (Tandoc, 2019, p. 3). When used for this content, fake news thus does inhibit conceptual usefulness (see also Tandoc, 2021).

2.1.2 Fake News is Used to Discredit Journalism

However, this is not the only way fake news is used in public and political discourse. There is another side of the fake news coin: Politicians have weaponized the term and use it to discredit news coverage and delegitimize journalism (e.g. Vosoughi et al., 2018). Thereby, they are "borrowing some of the phrase's original power" (Kurtzleben, 2017, para. 17), not merely discrediting the facticity of news, but suggesting that news media are *deliberately deceiving* the public with the *intention to cause harm*. Labeling the media "fake" is a whole new form of expressing criticism. While other news criticisms such as "biased news," "bad news," or "false news" still indicate that the news is *news,* the modifier "fake" implies that it is *not* news. It suggests that the accused news is not fulfilling its basic purpose, but instead pursues a hidden goal (Lakoff, 2017).

As a result, fake news is not only about the prevalence and effects of disinformation, but it might also distort perceptions of factual news coverage and undermine the credibility of news media. Therefore, in this dissertation (see Chapter 5), I distinguish between two dimensions of fake news: *the fake news genre*, i.e., pseudo-journalistic disinformation, and *the fake news label*, i.e., a political instrument to delegitimize journalism. Furthermore, I suggest that fake newsstands are representative of a general prevalence of *actual mis- and disinformation*, on the one hand, and increasing use of *accusations of mis- and disinformation,* on the other hand.

In the following, I will summarize what we know about both dimensions of fake news and outline the research gaps that motivated the studies of this dissertation. The review distinguishes between research on *actual* disinformation (the fake news genre) and studies on *accusations* of disinformation (the fake news label).

2.2. Fake News and Political Actors

First, I consider the role of political actors in the supply of the fake news genre. In recent years, research on the spread of fake news by political actors as part of so-called "disinformation campaigns" has been studied intensely, mostly under the framework of "computational propaganda," which describes the distribution of deceptive information on social media with help of algorithms (Woolley & Howard, 2017, p. 6; see also Woolley, 2020). In the scope of this dissertation, I only highlight a few key insights (see Guess & Lyons, 2020 for an extensive review of this research).

The literature suggests that both domestic and foreign political actors are involved in the creation and spread of fake news (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Domestic sources of fake news are mostly associated with populist radical-right political actors who mainly use disinformation to target voters before elections (Corbu & Negrea-Busuioc, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). More attention has been paid to the spread of fake news and disinformation by foreign sources, primarily on Russia. For example, studies show how the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an organization linked to the Kremlin, operated social media accounts for interference into the 2016 US presidential elections (e.g., Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Yin et al., 2018).[4]

[4] Of course, countries other than Russia employ such efforts. For example, scholars suspect that the Chinese government pays citizens to distribute deceptive social media posts (King et al., 2017; for other examples see Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Research identifies a number of possible goals that political actors pursue with these fake news campaigns, such as destabilization of political institutions, center parties, and governments; targeting press freedom and freedom of speech; undermining foreign relations; and even the destabilization of whole states (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). However, most attention has been paid to the interference of elections, such as the 2016 US presidential election, the 2016 UK Brexit referendum, and the 2017 German election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020).

Much less research has considered politicians' use of *accusations* of fake news or disinformation. This research almost exclusively focuses on communication by US President Donald Trump, showing that he used the fake news label extensively on *Twitter*, mainly to accuse liberal outlets such as *CNN* and *The New York Times* (e.g., Hameleers, 2020; Meeks, 2019; Ross & Rivers, 2018), but also the media in general (Meeks, 2019). Thereby, these accusations likely are not only intended to undermine the credibility of certain critical news outlets, but also to create general uncertainty about the truth value of news coverage and to destabilize trust in journalism as a whole. Additionally, Ross and Rivers (2018) show how Trump used fake news accusations frequently as a reaction to media outlets rebutting his own spread of disinformation, suggesting that these accusations are part of a distraction strategy. Only a small number of studies considered political actors outside the US. They show, for example, that the Dutch populist politician, Geert Wilders, has frequently accused the established media of disinformation (Hameleers, 2020). Furthermore, an analysis of fake news discourse in Australia shows that the term is used by some populist politicians (Farhall et al., 2019).

So, in summary, while the use of actual disinformation and fake news by political actors is rapidly growing, only a handful of studies have explored their use of the fake news label. Specifically, there are three concrete gaps that emerge from the literature. First, we simply need more information about the prevalence of the fake news label in politicians' rhetoric outside

the US. While Donald Trump has coined the phrase, it has been suggested that the fake news label has been "appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable" (Wardle & Derakshan, 2018; p. 5). However, thus far, we lack studies to confirm this hypothesis. Second, as outlined in Section 1.2, an anti-elitist stance that includes the media is inherent to populism. Therefore, it is not surprising that the previously reviewed studies of populist politicians' social media communication find that these actors indeed make use of the fake news label to discredit media (Farhall, et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Meeks, 2019; Ross & Rivers). However, these studies (except for Farhall et al., 2019) focus on populist politicians' communication only. To conclude that populists do, in fact, make more use of these accusations than non-populist politicians, we must analyze the communication of both actor groups.

Lastly, the fake news label (and disinformation accusations in general) are arguably only one, albeit very prominent, aspect of criticism used to attack news media. Politicians' use of increasingly hostile media criticism is seen as a an attempt to delegitimize journalism (e.g., Carlson, 2018; Van Dalen, 2019). However, thus far, it remains unclear how prevalent politicians' media criticism really is, to what extent it is delegitimizing the media, and how central the fake news label is in media criticism. To truly understand the wider range of politicians' media criticism, broader analyses of politicians' general engagement with the media are required. Therefore, Chapter 7 of this dissertation investigates *how fake news is used* as part of (populist and non-populist) politicians' (delegitimizing) media criticism compared to other references to the media (*RQ2*).

To fill these gaps is crucial, as the usage of fake news accusations and related media criticism violate the basic norm of respect toward the media and can be categorized as an authoritarian key strategy to sideline central players of democratic systems (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 147-148). As such, they can have detrimental consequences. First, we know that politicians' rhetoric and especially their media criticism, negatively impact citizens' media

perceptions (Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010; Zaller, 1992). Accusing the media of spreading fake news might be particularly effective, as these accusations draw on the uncertainty about accuracy of information that is widespread today (Newman et al., 2018; 2019).

Second, these media attacks might have negative effects on journalists' well-being, causing negative emotions (e.g., Obermaier et al., 2018). The attacks, therefore, might also affect their reporting. When journalists feel threatened, they might change their tone and the content of their stories. Lastly, if the public can be convinced that the media are indeed intentionally spreading lies, taking actions (such as press freedom restrictions) against them likely becomes easier (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). While worries about the attempts to mix in restrictions on press freedom in the "fight against fake news" have been voiced (Reporters without Borders, 2017), it is not clear how prevalent this type of discourse is.

2.3. Fake News in (Social) Media

Fake news is supplied on social media and mass media. This section summarizes the research on this supply starting again with the fake news genre and then turning to the fake news label.

Most research in the spread of fake news has, thus far, focused on the role of *social media*. Specifically, it focuses on how visible fake news is on social media for users, how it is distributed, and how its spread may be curbed. Research on the prevalence of fake news began with observations of the 2016 US presidential elections (e.g., Silverman, 2016). While fake news most often originates from websites whose sole purpose it is to disseminate disinformation (Vargo et al., 2018), social media platforms such as Facebook have been found to play a decisive role in its dissemination (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). That is, exposure to fake news rarely takes place on these fake news websites, but rather on social media (Guess et al., 2020; Nelson & Taneja, 2018), where fake news reports are more prone to go viral (Silverman, 2016) and spread faster than real news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). On social media, fake news is

predominantly shared by citizens (Golovchenko et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2018), even more so than by social bots (Vosoughi et al., 2018). However, citizens mostly do not aid the dissemination of fake news intentionally, rather due to their inattention (Pennycook et al., 2020, 2021) or "because they want to help, entertain, or inform friends and family" (Duffy et al., 2020, p. 1965).

There is a growing literature on how the dissemination of fake news may be curbed, be it with intensified fact-checking operations (e.g., Mena, 2020; Graves & Cherubini, 2016; Walter et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2019) or automated detection approaches using artificial intelligence to identify falsehoods (e.g., Kaur et al., 2020; Tacchini et al., 2017; Thota et al., 2018). This research also suggests that exposure to fake news on social media and on fake news websites is often rather limited (Fletcher et al., 2018; Guess et al., 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2019). That is, only a minor segment of the overall population regularly views fake news (Guess et al., 2018; 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Most citizens ignore fake news they encounter on social media (Tandoc et al., 20120) and spend considerably more time with real news exposure (Fletcher et al., 2018). Thus, while consumption through fake news websites and social media platforms might be more limited than first anticipated, survey research indicates that many citizens still know (and sometimes believe) fake news stories (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Based on this, Tsfati and colleagues (2020) suggest that most people learn about fake news in the coverage of (mainstream) news media.

There are different scenarios, *through which news media* can become disseminators of fake news. First, they can knowingly spread it, because it fits their issue agendas. In this context, hyper-partisan news outlets, such as *Infowars* are mentioned (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; McNair, 2018). For example, research suggests that in the US, partisan news media repeatedly incorporated fake news stories in their coverage when it aligned with their agenda (Benkler et al., 2018; Vargo et al., 2018). Second, and arguably more often, journalists likely cover fake

news without the intention of deceiving their audiences. Most likely, mainstream news media report fake news in an attempt to fact-check them, due to their role as providers of correct information. As journalists need to repeat the fake news claims in order to correct them, it is likely that many citizens who otherwise would not have been exposed to those stories learn about them through the media (Tsfati et al., 2020).

Moreover, journalists cover fake news stories simply because they are newsworthy. They often mirror national news agendas (Humprecht, 2018) and are mostly sensational, negative, emotional, and outlandish focusing on prominent (political) actors (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Thereby, they meet important news values, such as negativity and prominence (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2021; Tsfati et al., 2020). Lastly, it is also possible that journalists include fake news in their coverage, simply because they believe it to be true, or because they do not have the time, capacity or skills to verify content sufficiently (McNair, 2017). Based on the above, it seems highly probable that mainstream news media act as significant disseminators of fake news (Tsfati et al., 2020), "resulting in an 'amplifier effect' for stories that would be dismissed as absurd in earlier eras of more effective press gatekeeping" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 123).

However, despite this relevance, there is only very little empirical research on how journalists cover fake news (see also Tsfati et al., 2020), i.e., only a few analyses, all focusing on US news coverage, and mostly on coverage related to the 2016 elections (Carlson, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2019). Findings indicate that journalists in general perceive fake news as a social problem and mostly connect the responsibility for this problem with online platforms and especially social media sites (Carlson, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2019), thus not focusing on their role in the dissemination.

Even less attention has been paid to the role of social media and journalistic actors in *accusations* of fake news. Social media, straightforwardly, simply offers a platform for political

(e.g., Hameleers, 2020), private (e.g., Brummette et al., 2018) and media actors (e.g., Farhall et al., 2019) to make use of fake news accusations.

Turning to the role of news media, only a handful of studies consider how journalists cover fake news accusations. These studies focus on US journalists responses to Donald Trump's use of the fake news label (Koliska et al., 2020; Lawrence & Moon, 2021; Lischka, 2019). However, some of the above summarized considerations regarding the reasons why journalists cover *actual* fake news, can be translated to their coverage of fake news *accusations* as well. First, of course, is that some journalists might intentionally use these accusations themselves against news media with opposing views. For example, the hyper-partisan outlet *Breitbart* frequently accuses outlets such as *CNN* of spreading fake news (e.g., Nolte, 2018).

Second, many journalists report these accusations in order to correct them and to clarify that their coverage is not fake or even false. For example, when confronting Trump's fake news accusations, journalists frequently emphasize their professional norms and practices, especially the value of truth in their work (Koliska et al.,2020; Lawrence & Moon, 2021; Lischka, 2019). Third, similar to actual fake news, accusations of fake news meet a number of news values. They are often made by well-known political figures, (e.g., Trump), thus meeting the elite people and relevance criteria (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Furthermore, they are negative and emphasize conflict between the accuser and the accused media actor. This conflict is also mirrored in the finding that many journalists critically confront Donald Trump in their coverage (Koliska et al., 2020; Lawrence & Moon, 2021).

In summary, research on the spread of actual fake news on social media is growing rapidly. However, while statistics indicate that since early 2016 the number of news articles using the phrase "fake news" has increased ubiquitously (e.g., McNair, 2018, p. 6), empirical research on the journalistic coverage of fake news is scarce. Only very few studies investigate how journalists report on actual fake news or on accusations of fake news, focusing on specific events in the US context.

As a result, there is a need for a broader analysis of *how fake news is used* by journalists (*RQ2*) more generally. Particularly, there are at least three specific gaps that need to be addressed. First, we do not know how journalists ascribe meaning to fake news. That is, we do not know in which contexts journalists report on fake news, whether they focus more on the fake news genre, the fake news label, or whether they use the phrase in other contexts as well. Second, we lack knowledge about how journalistic coverage of fake news evolves over time. Third, we simply need analyses of media coverage on fake news outside the US, as it has become a topic of concern for citizens around the world (Newman, 2018; 2019). These gaps are addressed in Chapter 6.

News media are still the most important information source for the majority of citizens (e.g., Newman, 2019). The way journalists cover fake news is thus of crucial relevance for at least two reasons. First, according to agenda setting theory (e.g., McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972;), the salience of issues in news coverage relates to the perceived importance of the issues by the public. That way, frequent news reports on issues can lead to overestimated risk perceptions. For example, many people overestimate the risk of becoming a victim of terroristic attacks, which might be at least partly explained with the prominence of terrorism in the news (Ranan, 2020a).

Furthermore, heightened risk perceptions due to prominent news coverage might have consequences for political behavior as well. Research suggests that the more salient the topic of immigration is in news coverage, the more citizens intend to vote for parties with an anti-immigration stance (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007). Thereby, noticeable usage of fake news in media coverage might contribute to the increasing uncertainty of citizens about what information is real or fake (Newman et al., 2018; 2019) and their overestimations of the risk of disinformation (Mitchell et al., 2019). Second, in the same vein, as journalists likely contribute to the spread of actual fake news (Tsfati et al., 2020), they might also amplify fake news accusations (see also Farhall et al., 2020). This could have a detrimental backfire effect on

journalism, as research suggests that extensive news coverage about politicians fake news accusations (Guess et al., 2017) or media bias accusations (Watts et al., 1999) can have negative effect on citizens' media perceptions

2.4. The Consequences of Fake News

In this section, I deepen the discussion on how both the fake news genre and the fake news label affect citizens.

A main issue in the literature on fake news has been the concern that it leads to misperceptions about political issues and thereby impacts election outcomes (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). While studies show that citizens have been very worried about the effects of fake news on the 2016 US presidential election (Barthel et al., 2016, para. 2), there is little research on this topic. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) argue that on the aggregate level, citizens' exposure to fake news stories was not high enough to have had an electoral impact. A study on the 2018 Italian elections suggests that exposure to fake news is related to voting for populist parties; however, the direction of this relation is unclear (Cantarella et al., 2020). Lastly, in the context of the 2017 German parliamentary election, Zimmermann and Kohring (2020) find that a belief in fake news drove voters from the main governing party, CDU/CSU, to the right-wing populist party AfD. Further research is needed to understand the consequences of fake news on elections and other politically relevant outcomes.

While the effects of fake news on political behavior are not fully understood, there is considerable evidence on the third person effect of fake news. That is, several studies show that individuals tend to believe that others, especially members of a social out-group, are more likely to fall for fake news than they or members of their in-group (e.g., Corbu et al., 2020; Jang & Kim, 2018; Yang et al., 2021).

Another line of research relating to the formation of misperceptions as consequence of fake news exposure explores what social and psychological characteristics render people susceptible to believe fake news. Here, studies show that people who distrust mainstream media (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) and instead get their news mainly on Facebook (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016) struggle to detect fake news. The main psychological factors that explain belief in false news stories are a lack of relevant knowledge, as well as reliance on heuristics such as familiarity (Bago et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; 2020; 2021).

There is considerably less research on the effects of fake news accusations, although some scholars argue that citizens' exposure to the fake news label might be actually more pronounced than their exposure to the fake news genre (e.g., Scott, 2021a). However, fake news accusations are potentially very impactful. First, as mentioned previously, they tap into uncertainty perceptions. That is, many citizens feel that fake news is a big threat to society (Mitchell et al., 2019) to which they are regularly exposed (Hameleers et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2018; 2019). Using fake news accusations attributes the blame for this problem to the media. Attributions of blame are persuasive because they offer a simple cause for a complex problem (Hameleers, 2021). In this case, the media are the source for the prevalent problem of fake news and disinformation. As the accuracy of information in the news is the central factor for people's media trust (e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020, see also Fawzi et al., 2020), accusing the media of spreading fake news and disinformation should have a negative effect on people's trust in the media.

Thus far, this assumption has rarely been tested. However, there is some initial research that indicates that using the fake news label could indeed be an effective strategy to undermine citizens' media perceptions. For example, in one study exposure to fictive elites' discourse about fake news had a negative effect on general media trust (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019), even though the phrase was not even used against news media. Another study found that when people

learn that Trump accused the media's coverage on a specific topic as fake news, it had a negative effect on the general media trust of citizens supporting Trump; however, this was not the case for those who disapproved of him (Guess et al., 2017).

Overall, these studies hint at the effectiveness of the fake news label as a political strategy, while they do not yet provide a comprehensive picture, and the findings from the US context cannot be directly transferred to other populations (e.g., Humprecht et al., 2018; Wright, 2021a). This leaves us with several important research gaps regarding the effects of the fake news label.

First, while it is important to understand the effects of fake news accusations on media trust, there are other outcomes to consider as well. For example, research has shown that politicians use these accusations not only against the media as a whole, but also as a reaction to a specific news story with the goal of discrediting the news outlet and story containing damaging information about the politician (Ross & Rivers, 2018). It is thus necessary to understand whether this political strategy effectively undermines trust in specific (critical) news outlets and whether it impacts the audience's belief in news narratives. Second, the question of how using fake news accusations affects citizens' perceptions of the politician has not been considered. However, as these accusations are uncivil and often unjustified, thereby violating norms of deliberate debate (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020), it is crucial to understand whether politicians can use this type of political communication style without fearing a negative backlash on how they are perceived. Third, although the affinity between populist attitudes and anti-media attitudes has been established in extant research (as discussed in Section 1.2.2; Fawzi, 2020; Schulz et al., 2018), and survey research suggests a link between populist attitudes and perceptions of disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2021), thus far it has not been tested whether citizens with populist attitudes are more susceptible to fake news accusations. If that were the case, it could further increase the emerging polarization of media perceptions between populist and non-populist citizens (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2018) and drive them more toward non-

mainstream news media (e.g., Stier et al., 2020). Lastly, while it seems likely that the politicized buzzword "fake news" has become a heuristic cue leading to the above-reviewed effects, it has never been tested whether fake news accusations are indeed *more* effective than disinformation accusations that do not include this phrase.

In sum, fake news accusations are likely persuasive and potentially have a variety of effects. However, the current literature provides an incomplete picture of *what its consequences are (RQ3).* If these accusations indeed are an effective means for politicians to decrease trust in the media in general and specific outlets, and reduce belief in their narratives, it could have harmful consequences for democracies. Citizens require factual information for meaningful democratic decision-making (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). However, as cannot they gather and verify all needed information, they must trust that the media provides accurate and reliable information (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). While worries about a general decrease in media trust might be exaggerated and there are differences among countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018), it is evident that many citizens already have little confidence in news media (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Further decreasing this confidence might contribute to less news use (ibid.), thereby jeopardizing the dissemination of political information. Moreover, it could increase belief in disinformation (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) and possibly enlarge a polarization of reality perceptions in society.

In conclusion, the point of departure of this dissertation is that while research on fake news is surging, it is neglecting that it is actually more than a specific type of disinformation. Instead, fake news has become a political strategy with possibly harmful consequences for citizens' perceptions of news media. Therefore, the way fake news is used by actors involved in political communication and how might be even more momentous for the state of deliberative democracy. Therefore, the chapters of this dissertation will clarify *fake news actually is (RQ1), how it is used (RQ2) and what its consequences are (RQ3).*

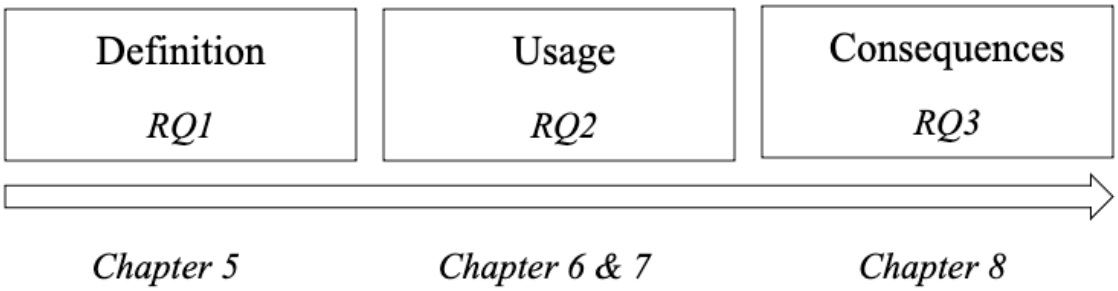

Figure 2. Visualization of Research Questions and Research Chapters

[i] Importantly, this is not to suggest that information provided by these institutions is automatically true. Journalists and scientists make mistakes and sometimes are influenced by profit or partisanship (e.g., Nielsen & Fletcher, 2019). However, by and large, these professions are characterized by rules and norms that are intended to minimize these influences. Nevertheless, as all truth claims, also journalistic and scientific information is fallible and must be open for scrutiny in public discourse (e.g., Chambers, 2017)

III. Methodological Considerations

To answer the general research questions *what is fake news (RQ1), how is it used (RQ2), and what are its consequences? (RQ3)*, this dissertation applies a multi-method design, consisting of four studies. The first article (Chapter 5) is a theoretical paper proposing a conceptualization of the fake news phenomenon, addressing *RQ1*. In this section, I focus on the methodological considerations of the three remaining *empirical* studies (see Table 1). To understand how fake news is used (*RQ2*), I conducted two quantitative content analyses (Chapters 6 and 7), one of which (Chapter 7) received funding through the Supporting Grant Programme ("Förderungsstipendium") at the University of Vienna. After I established the prevalence of fake news use, I conducted an online survey experiment to analyze its effects and answer *RQ3* (Chapter 8).

Table 1. Overview of empirical studies

Article	Method	N	Sample	Country Context	Time	Chapter
2	Quantitative Content Analysis	2,967	Daily Newspaper Articles	Austria	2015-2018	6
3	Quantitative Content Analysis	2,921	Politicians' Media-related Facebook Postings	Austria & Germany	2017	7
4	Online Survey Experiment	1,330	Citizens	Austria	2020	8

1. Manual Content Analysis for Gauging the Use of Fake News

To understand how journalists and politicians use fake news (*RQ2*) I relied on two quantitative manual content analyses. Specifically, Chapter 6 analyzed news media articles using "fake news", while Chapter 7 analyzed media-related social media postings by politicians. Manual content analysis is one of the most important research methods in communication research and social science in general (Lacy et al., 2015; Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2017). It is a non-obtrusive approach, which allows for analyzing a wealth of data to explore (the meaning of) public discourses (Krippendorff, 2004; Macnamara, 2005). As any research method, content analysis comes with certain benefits and challenges. In the following, I will first discuss the advantages of content analysis that made me choose this approach. Thereafter, I outline some of the challenges of this method, and explain how I dealt with these.

1.1. Benefits: A Longitudinal View on Actual Public Discourse

To answer my second research question, I conducted two content analyses: In Chapter 6, I analyzed news articles by the eight most used Austrian daily newspapers (online and print), including quality and tabloid outlets. Chapter 7 analyzed *Facebook* postings by German and Austrian main party and party candidate accounts in 2017. I chose this method for the following reasons.

First, as stated above, content analysis is an unobtrusive method of examining mediated communication (Krippendorff, 2004; Macnamara, 2005). Naturally, the method fit my question of the use of the term in public discourse, i.e., I wanted to know what was already out there about the term. However, what is more, compared to a survey or interview approach, using content analysis also meant that I did not have to generate my own raw data from about who

actually use the term "fake news", such as journalists and politicians, but could rely on *available* and realistic content. Specifically, to gather the data for Chapter 6, I relied on the database APA Online Library, which provides access to online and offline articles of Austrian media outlets. The data for Chapter 7 were provided by Johan Gründl (2020), which allowed me to avoid common challenges in obtaining social media (and in particular Facebook) data (Zuckerman, 2021). This means that conducting these content analyses was, in the simplest way, *cost- and time-efficient* as much as it allowed me an insight into what citizens read and see every day in (social) media.

Second, a quantitative content approach allowed me to study relatively *larger amounts of data over very long time periods* (e.g., Macnamara, 2005, p. 6). For this reason, I was able to analyze the *evolution* of "fake news" in journalists' and politicians' communication over several years, thereby avoiding drawing conclusions from mere "snapshots" of public discourse. For example, in Chapter 6, I analyzed the total population of news articles on "fake news" from 2015 to 2018, i.e., full investigation rather than a sample only (of the selected outlets). This way, I was able to capture the full development of this debate across three years. Furthermore, by analyzing posts disseminated across 2017, Chapter 7 captured crucial trends in politicians' use of media criticism and "fake news" on social media. Actually, the year 2017 was a crucial year for my dissertation for two reasons. First, because the fake news label emerged at the beginning of 2017; i.e., US President Donald Trump started using it regularly, and politicians around the globe arguably followed suit, which led *Reporters Without Borders* to express concerns about the use of the term in March of that year (as discussed in the Introduction, Chapter 1). Furthermore, both analyzed countries held general elections in 2017, which provided me with the ability to compare the use of the fake news label in routine times as well as campaign periods, further widening the scope of my dissertation (see Chapter 7).

1.2. Challenges: Making "Fake News" Accusations Measurable

Naturally, manual content analysis also comes with a number of challenges that influence the validity and generalizability of my findings (Neuendorf, 2017).

To begin with, studying new phenomena has entailed developing new measurement instruments to examine them, i.e., new codes and codebooks. As there were no previously validated codebooks on the topic of "fake news" or (delegitimizing) media criticism that I could rely on, I developed an original operationalization for these concepts. The development of these codebooks was a thorough process in which deductive and inductive phases re-iterated each other. I started deductively, relying on relevant theory (Neuendorf, 2017). Specifically, Chapter 6 entails a descriptive analysis of how often journalists use "fake news" in the context of the *genre* or the *label,* and which definitional characteristics they provide when covering fake news. For operationalizing these concepts, I relied on the definitions and literature discussed in Chapter 5. When creating the codebook for Chapter 7, I relied on available qualitative content analyses on politicians' social media communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Haller & Holt, 2019). Furthermore, to operationalize the central concept in Chapter 7, *delegitimizing media criticism,* I relied on available theories of media criticism (e.g., Cheruiyot, 2018; 2019; Wyatt, 2007; 2019), deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Prochazaka et al., 2018) and incivility (e.g., Gervais, 2014; 2011; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Additionally, to ensure that these measurements can capture the reality as accurately as possible, inductive techniques were also included in the developing process of the measurement (e.g., in in-dept study of the characteristics of a small number of news articles on "fake news" and politicians' media-related social media postings).

Furthermore, for coding to provide useful information, it is necessary that the coding is done in a reliable manner (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 235). This can be a challenging endeavor in manual content analysis of very abstract concepts. To ensure high reliability in the coding

process, I followed available best practice examples (Krippendorf, 2004; Lacy et al., 2015; Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2017). First, the literature suggests to involve at least two coders in the process, of which at least one should not have developed the codebook (e.g., Lacy et al., 2015; Neuendorf, 2017; p. 235). In Chapter 6, three coders (of which two did not work on developing the codebook) were involved; in Chapter 7 four coders (none of which developed the codebook) worked on the coding. Second, coders should practice with non-study material until sufficient intercoder-reliability was reached. Third, intercoder-reliability checks needed to be conducted prior and towards the end of data collection (Lacy et al., 2015; Macnamara, 2005). For both studies, multiple extensive coder trainings took place, using non-study materials (Chapter 6: articles from other news outlets; Chapter 8: *Facebook* postings from other politicians), until sufficient reliability of all variables as established. Intercoder reliability checks were conducted at the start and towards the end of analyses. However, as coding took place regularly (i.e., for both studies, coders coded on several days per week), the likelihood for reliability deterioration was lower (Lacy et al., 2015, p. 806). Fourth, it is recommended to calculate percentage agreement and Krippendorff's alpha scores for all variables (ibid.) However, Krippendorff's alpha is quite sensitive to skewed distributions, meaning that this coefficient gives very conservative values when the occurrence of a specific code is rare (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Lacy et al., 2015, Lombard et al., 2002). As some variables that are central to this dissertation (e.g., media criticism, incivility, in Chapter 7) were quite infrequent in the data, I additionally calculated Brennan and Prediger's κ, which is more robust in assessing agreement for rare cases (e.g., Quarfoot & Levine, 2015). Therefore, all three reliability scores are reported for each variable in the Appendices of the Chapters. These measures (high number of coders, intensive coder training, intercoder-reliability checks, provision of several reliability coefficients) have led to sufficient reliability values in both studies.

Another common challenge in manual content analyses is generalizability, i.e., the degree to which findings based on the sample can readily be applied to the population. However, as discussed above, Chapters 6 and 7 use censuses and thus provide a complete picture of the issue in newspaper coverage and politicians' social media communication respectively. Nevertheless, there are some other issues with external validity; i.e., the degree to which I can generalize the findings of Chapters 6 and 7 to other communication fora (e.g., Neuendorf, 2017). I set out to study highly consumed and influential public communication that reaches a large number of citizens. However, by relying on articles from established (mainstream) newspapers (Chapter 6) and Facebook postings of main parties and candidates (Chapter 7), I focused on elite discourse only. Thus, knowledge gathered in these studies cannot simply be generalized to, for example, all fringe or alternative media and political counter-discourses. In the context of the fake news discourse and delegitimizing media criticism, alternative media (such as Unzensuriert.at) and more radical political actors (such as PEGIDA; see e.g., Holt & Haller, 2019) present additional relevant arenas for future study (see also Van Dalen, 2019). Moreover, the generalizability of my findings is restricted to the chosen time frames. As discussed before, the studied years of Chapters 6 and 7 provide fruitful insights into the start of this debate. However, future studies should investigate how "fake news" and delegitimizing media criticism evolves further in the coming years and decades.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I use a keyword search string to identify relevant observations that needed to be coded manually (i.e., those *Facebook* postings that relate to the media or journalist) within the total sample of *Facebook* postings by German and Austrian politicians (provided by Gründl, 2020). Because final dataset was fully manually coded (i.e., coders checked whether postings are relevant), precision is very high. However, the recall of the search string (i.e., the number of false negatives) is unknown, meaning that the possibility remains that some media-related postings were not included in the manual coding. To increase recall as much as possible, I took the following steps (as recommended by Lacy et al., 2015, p. 794). First, I drew multiple

keywords from related (qualitative) research (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Haller & Holt, 2019). Furthermore, I collected numerous synonyms and words that somehow relate to journalism, media, and media criticism. Additionally, I added the names of (German, Austrian, and international) specific news brands (newspaper and broadcast; mainstream and alternative) and formats as well as the names of several journalists. Lastly, I discussed the selected keywords with co-authors and several experts on German-speaking political communication research.

2. Experimentally Investigating the Consequences of Fake News

Chapter 8 considers *the consequences of fake news (RQ3).* More specifically, it investigates the effects of politicians' use of disinformation accusations (with the in- or exclusion of the word "fake news") on citizens' perceptions of news media, information, and the politician using the accusation. It relies on data obtained from an online survey experiment, entailing a between-subject design. Specifically, participants were exposed to a social media page by a politician, that included two news articles and a number of postings. In the experimental conditions, some of the postings included disinformation accusations (with or without the phrase "fake news"). In this section, I will again highlight some of the advantages and challenges of the method in relation to my research.

2.1. Benefits: Examining Causal Effects of Fake News Accusations

The most fundamental advantage of the experimental approach is that it is high in internal validity and enables a test of *causality* (e.g., Iyengar, 2011; McDermott; 2011). As my research interest in Chapter 8 was to understand how different disinformation accusations affect citizens' perceptions, I had to be able to clearly distinguish between the accusation as the *cause* and the

changes in citizens' attitudes as the *result.* The experimental setting enables standardization and a high amount of control over extraneous factors, which entails that all respondents "undergo a similar experience, with the exception of the experimental manipulation" (Ebel-Lam & MacDonald, 2007, p. 330). Furthermore, using a between-subject design, in which participants are *randomly* assigned to one of the conditions (experimental or control), ensures comparability of the groups regarding the dependent variables (e.g., Druckman et al., 2011). Therefore, I could attribute the detected differences in the perceptions of media, information or politician to the fake news accusation as compared to naturally occurring differences in participants (e.g., Iyengar, 2011).

Another benefit of experimental design is that allows for testing very subtle variations in the stimulus material (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020, p. 7; Iyengar, 2011, p. 75). A key interest of Chapter 8 was to investigate whether disinformation accusations including the term "fake news" lead to stronger effects compared to disinformation accusations without this term. Using a survey experiment made it possible to test these subtle variations in the disinformation accusation while keeping the content of the accusation constant. Testing rather subtle differences necessitates to check whether manipulation was successful (e.g., Druckman et al., 2011). Therefore, I included manipulation check items asking respondents whether there was a disinformation accusation present and whether there was the phrase "fake news" present. To avoid that the manipulation check itself becomes an intervention (see e.g., Hauser et al., 2018), these items were placed at the very end of the survey.

2.2. Challenges: Experimental Realism in a Complex Media Environment

Using a survey experiment also came with a number of challenges. More specifically, findings of experiments are difficult to *generalize* to other contexts, audiences and time frames (Shadish et al., 2002), that is, they are generally low in external and ecological validity. Furthermore, results can be influences by pre-treatment effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012).

Experimental findings are usually lower in their external validity (e.g., Barabas & Jerit, 2010; Koch et al., 2019; McDermott, 2011; Mullinix et al., 2016). To mitigate this weakness, Chapter 8 relies on a big, diverse sample (N = 1,330), varied in age, gender and education. This sample is not representative for the Austrian population nor that of Western democracies, or other national contexts. However, the goal of Chapter 8 was not to establish findings that generalize to all Austrian (or European) citizens in general, but to test the causal mechanism derived from theory (McDermott, 2011, p. 57). Furthermore, due to their rather artificial setting and forced exposure, experiments are mostly low in ecological validity or mundane realism; i.e., the degree to which activities in the experiment can be compared to activities in common in respondents' everyday life (Wegener & Blankenship, 2007, p. 275). Although Chapter 8 also entails forced exposure to content that participants would not have encountered otherwise, I tried to ensure mundane realism to the best extent. For example, I used a realistic *Twitter* page. Furthermore, the news articles stemmed from the real Austrian news brand (*Kleine Zeitung*) and focused on factual information taken from actual news coverage.

Nevertheless, the experimental setting is different from situations in citizens' everyday life and the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, the "generalizability of *any* research finding is limited" (Aronson et al. 1990, p. 82, emphasis added) and only replication can overcome this limitation (McDermott, 2011, p. 57). As experiments are "inherently replicable" (Iyengar, 2011, p. 81), testing the robustness of the findings of Chapter 8 across other contexts (countries, time, audiences, environment of exposure) is an important area for future research.

Another important challenge in experimental research are pretreatment effects. Pretreatment refers to situations in which respondents have been exposed to some aspect of (political) communication that relates to the stimulus, before they participated in the experiment (i.e., pretreatment). A pretreatment effect occurs when the pretreatment shapes respondents' responses to the stimulus (Druckman & Leeper, 2012). The likelihood for this to happen is

especially high when studying the effects of "real world" political communication (Gaines, et al., 2007). Although pretreatment effects cannot be avoided entirely, I attempted to limit their likelihood, by using a fictious politician without a party cue. Party cues play a central role in opinion formation (e.g., Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). They have reputations about where they stand on policy issues. Therefore, it is highly likely that participants have already knowledge about the stance of a party (member) before they are expose to the stimulus (Slothuus, 2016). For example, respondents could be pretreated about the party's or party member (negative) relationship towards news media before being exposed to a fake news accusation. That is, the problem of studying real-life politicians is that any new information about these actors "is interpreted against a background of whatever prior information citizens have stored about [them] in their memories" (Gadarian & Lau, 2011, p. 223). Furthermore, real-life politicians can evoke unrelated thoughts from respondents that could influence the results (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Therefore, many studies that test the (persuasive) effects of politicians' communication use fictitious politicians without party cues (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019; Van't Riet et al., 2019).

3. Country Context

Whether analyzing actual or accusations of fake news and disinformation, by and large, the vast majority of studies on the topic focus on the United States, a "unique case" that has been shown to be highly vulnerable to inaccurate content (Humprecht et al., 2020, p. 6). However, fake news and disinformation are by no means an US-American challenge only, but also affect other consolidated democracies, such as Austria and Germany (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Newman, 2018, 2019). Moreover, they play a role in unconsolidated and (semi-)authoritarian regimes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2021) The research in this

dissertation is mainly based on the Austrian case (Chapter 6, 7, 8) with one study also taking into account Germany (Chapter 7). Both countries have been categorized as resilient to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). The political and media-related aspects that possibly render Austria and Germany resilient are discussed in the following. The last section offers a brief overview of existing knowledge on the prevalence of disinformation in both countries.

3.1. Politics in Austria and Germany

Austria and Germany are both multi-party systems with similar party families and relatively little political polarization (e.g., Humprecht et al., 2020). As in many Western parliamentary democracies, established parties in both Austria and Germany are challenged by successful populist parties, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Both parties have been especially successful in national elections in 2017 (i.e., the year in which Chapter 7 analyses politicians' use of fake news).

The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) is one of Europe's oldest and most successful rightwing populist parties (Schmuck et al., 2017). The FPÖ was part of government twice already, both times in coalition with the People's Party (ÖVP). However, during the first coalition in 2000, the ÖVP-FPÖ government caused outrage both within and beyond Austria. The second time around, in 2017, there were fewer critical reactions to the inclusion of the FPÖ in government. Moreover, during the 2017 election campaign, the ÖVP adopted the rhetoric and political agenda of the FPÖ, rendering its rhetoric populist also (Wodak, 2019). This indicates a that Austria is part of a larger (arguably pan-European or even global; Bos et al., 2020; Mudde, 2019) normalization process of far-right populist ideology (Eberl, Huber, & Plescia, 2020; Wodak 2019). In 2019, the second ÖVP-FPÖ coalition ended abruptly due to the "Ibizagate" scandal involving then Vice-Chancellor and FPÖ party leader Heinz-Christian Strache (e.g.,

Eberl, Huber, & Plescia, 2020). Relevant for this dissertation is also that the FPÖ has a long history of anti-media rhetoric, and has always been particularly critical of the public service broadcaster ORF (Engesser et al., 2017; Schmuck et al., 2020).

However, as part of government, threats to press freedom intensified, with the FPÖ repeatedly verbally attacking news media, publicizing attempts to push the abolition of the mandatory license fees that finances ORF (Austrian public broadcasting), and attempted restrictions of information sharing with critical news outlets (Reporters without Borders, 2018; Sparviero & Trappel, 2019). Since the its latest government period, the FPÖ continues to criticize news media on a regular basis (Sparviero & Trappel, 2021). In comparison to the FPÖ, today's most successful German populist party, The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is rather young. It was only founded in early 2013 and elected in parliament in 2017 (Fawzi et al., 2017). The AfD also engages in harsh anti-media rhetoric, especially against public service media (e.g., Holt & Haller, 2017, p. 43).

3.2 Media Landscape in Austria and Germany

Austria and Germany both belong to the Northern European democratic-corporatist model of media systems, that are characterized by strong public service broadcasting media, still comparably high newspaper circulation, and relatively high professionalization of journalism (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin & Mancini 2004). However, Austria's media system is characterized by much higher media concentration, both in terms of media ownership and market shares, compared to other Northern European media systems (e.g., Plasser & Pallaver, 2017). In both countries, the public service broadcasters (ORF and ARD/ZDF) are the most trusted and most used media brands, however, use of paid and free tabloid newspapers (in particular the Kronen Zeitung and BILD) is also high in both countries (Hölig & Hasebrink, 2019; Sparviero & Trappel, 2019). In Austria, the tabloid newspaper Kronen Zeitung has by far

the largest reach, accounting for about thirty percent of the total circulation of Austrian newspapers, but free daily tabloids are also growing (Lohmann & Riedl, 2019). The market share of the German tabloid BILD is only about ten percent (Plasser & Pallaver, 2017). While print news use is comparatively high (especially in Austria), online news use has increased over the past years, with more and more citizens assessing news through social media (DNR, 2019; 2020). For example, in 2020, almost half of Austrian citizens (45%) indicate that they consume news on social media, mainly on Facebook (30%) (Sparviero & Trappel, 2019). General media trust in Germany and Austria is rather high, although it has been slightly decreasing in the past years (Sparviero & Trappel, 2019). However, as in most countries (Newman, 2021, p. 9), the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to a boost in trust in and use of news media in Germany (Höllig & Hasebrink, 2021, p. 80) and Austria (Sparviero & Trappel, 2021, p. 64).

3.3. "Fake News" and Disinformation in Austria and Germany

As discussed above, Austria and Germany – in comparison to US and Southern European countries – are characterized by a high resilience to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). However, both countries still experienced spread of fake news and disinformation. Especially sensationalist stories about immigrants have been circulated in Germany and Austria (Humprecht, 2018). Responding to the spread of disinformation, *Facebook* has expanded its fact checking initiative to Germany (in 2019) and Austria (in 2020) (Facebook, 2019; 2020). Furthermore, to combat the spread of fake news and hate-speech on social media, the German government passed the Network Enforcement Act in 2017. The law requires social media companies to have disinformation removed (e.g., Eddy & Scott, 2017). Austria had a law against false reporting, but in 2016 the paragraph was abolished (der Standard, 2016).

The spread of disinformation also concerns citizens. For example, in 2019, almost half of Austrian (40%) and German (38 %) citizens indicated that they are "very or extremely

concerned about what is real or fake" in online news (Newman, 2019, p. 21). During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation about the coronavirus caused considerable confusion among citizens. For example, in Austria a survey shows that less than half of the respondents were able to identify five prominent false claims relating to the virus as disinformation (Eberl, Lebernegg, Boomgaarden, 2020). Additional research shows that the beliefs in conspiracy theories is related to populist attitudes (Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2020).

Lastly, and most importantly for this dissertation, the use of disinformation accusations seems to be a relevant challenge in Austria and Germany. For example, more than half of Austrian citizens indicate they are highly worried about "the use of the term 'fake news' to discredit news media" (Fletcher 2018, p. 39). Furthermore, both Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) (Wodak, 2019, p. 204) and Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ) (der Standard, 2018) have used the fake news label to discredit news coverage. German politicians belonging to the AfD have also used disinformation accusations, specifically the "Lügenpresse" (lying press) accusations (coined by the far-right populist movement, PEGIDA) are prevalent (Holt & Haller, 2017).

In sum, compared to the US, Austria and Germany are considered to be relatively resilient to disinformation and thus represent conservative cases to find the fake news debate. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the threat of fake news is fairly pronounced in Austria and Germany, and populist politicians have already engaged in fake news accusations. Therefore, this case selection enables me to examine the scope of the fake news label and its consequences, as it shows how prevalent this concept is in countries where one would least expect it. Furthermore, both countries are a representative case for other Western European democracies (i.e., Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, The Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden and UK) and Canada, which also have been identified as "media-supportive consensual" countries, highly resilient to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020, p. 14). Therefore, it is possible that similar patterns as the one studied in this dissertation could also be found in these countries.

IV. Overview of Manuscripts

This cumulative dissertation consists of four research articles, which are presented in the following chapters (Table 2). Chapter 5, 6 and 7 are published in peer-reviewed journals, namely *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *Journalism Studies*, and *Journal of Language and Politics*. Chapter 8 is under review at *Journal of Communication* (*JoC*, Revise & Resubmit, 7.10. 2021). All chapters were written in collaboration with one or more co-authors (see Table 2), but I was the main contributor in terms of theory, research design, analysis, and writing. The articles are presented exactly as published, with an additional numbering of the pages which is in line with the consecutive page numbers of this dissertation. However, the numbering of the figures and tables in the following four chapters deviate from the consecutive order of the rest of the dissertation.

Table 2. Overview of articles presented in this cumulative dissertation.

Chapter	Status	Citation
5	Published	Egelhofer, J. L., & Lecheler, S. (2019). Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: A framework and research agenda. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *43*(2), 97-116.
6	Published	Egelhofer, J. L., Aaldering, L., Eberl, J. M., Galyga, S., & Lecheler, S. (2020). From novelty to normalization? How journalists use the term "fake news" in their reporting. *Journalism Studies*, *21*(10), 1323-1343.
7	Published	Egelhofer, J. L., Aaldering, L., & Lecheler, S. (2021). Delegitimizing the media? Analyzing politicians' media criticism on social media. *Journal of Language and Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20081.ege
8	Revision at *JoC*	Egelhofer, J. L., Boyer, M. M. Aaldering, L., & Lecheler, S. (submitted). The Differential Effects of Disinformation Accusations on (Populist) Citizens.

Annals of the International Communication Association

ISSN: 2380-8985 (Print) 2380-8977 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rica20

Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda

Jana Laura Egelhofer & Sophie Lecheler

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Published online: 09 Apr 2019.

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2019, VOL. 43, NO. 2, 97–116
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Routledge
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Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Based on an extensive literature review, we suggest that 'fake news' alludes to two dimensions of political communication: the *fake news genre* (i.e. the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation) and the *fake news label* (i.e. the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media). While public worries about the use of the label by politicians are increasing, scholarly interest is heavily focused on the genre aspect of fake news. We connect the existing literature on fake news to related concepts from political communication and journalism research, present a theoretical framework to study fake news, and formulate a research agenda. Thus, we bring clarity to the discourse about fake news and suggest shifting scholarly attention to the neglected fake news label.

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Fake news; review; journalistic legitimacy; disinformation; media criticism; political instrumentalization; research agenda

Introduction

The so-called 'fake news' crisis has been one of the most discussed topics in both public and scientific discourse since the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). While the term fake news was originally applied to political satire (e.g. Baym, 2005), it now seems to stand for all things 'inaccurate' (e.g. Lazer et al., 2017; Tambini, 2017) and is even applied in contexts that are completely unrelated to mediated communication (e.g. in research articles such as 'Are Meta-Analyses a Form of Medical Fake News?' Packer, 2017). What fake news stands for, however, is something larger than the term itself: a fundamental shift in political and public attitudes to what journalism and news represent and how facts and information may be obtained in a digitalized world.

The purpose of this paper is to restructure the existing literature and future research efforts dealing with the phenomenon of 'fake news' at large. We posit that fake news is, in essence, a two-dimensional phenomenon of public communication: there is the *(1) fake news genre*, describing the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation, and there is the *(2) fake news label*, describing the political instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media. While research on the genre is gaining attention, there is only limited research on the delegitimizing efforts visible in many Western democracies today. As the hype around fake news in terms of information and false news continues, the term has been effectively weaponized by political actors to attack a variety of news media (e.g. Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Based on the literature from journalism, political science, and communication research, we contextualize the two dimensions of fake news within the current political climate and describe how they

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relate to other concepts. In doing so, we suggest that 'fake news' is more than just an isolated event or a buzzword to be easily dismissed; it is the expression of a larger and fundamental shift within the technological and political underpinnings of mediated communication in modern democracies. Our review of the available empirical research on fake news as a genre and a label allows for future research to build on existing findings and contrasts these findings with existing concepts within the literature. We also offer a research agenda to meet unanswered challenges. With this extensive review, we bring clarity to the discourse surrounding fake news, and we suggest shifting scholarly attention to the neglected *fake news label*.

Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon

Condensing 'a wide range of news-gathering practices into the same noun' has been causing problems for definitions of 'real news' and journalism as a profession for a long time now (Carlson, 2017, p. 19). Along the same lines, overly general conceptualizations of the term 'fake news' can even be outright dangerous, as citizens struggle to distinguish legitimate news from fake news in a digital information environment (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). Even more importantly, research has begun to show that 'fake' news is often understood as news one does not believe in – thereby blurring the boundaries between facts and beliefs in a confusing digitalized world (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Unhelpfully, scholars have been tempted to use the term to describe many different things, such as propagandistic messages from state-owned media (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016), extreme partisan alternative media (e.g. Bakir & McStay, 2018), and fabricated news from short-lived websites (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). To make matters worse, political actors have seized the opportunity to use the term as a weapon to undermine any information that contradicts their own political agenda (e.g. Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Nielsen & Graves, 2017; UN OSCE, OAS, & ACHPR, 2017). This instrumentalization of the term fake news by political actors is severely understudied.

We suggest to take a more guided approach, and argue that there is a fundamental difference between what constitutes fake news and what the term is used for: There is the *fake news genre*, describing the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation, and the *fake news label*, namely, the instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media (see Figure 1).

The 'fake news' genre

The three pillars of fake news

We reviewed the available studies that define fake news, resulting in three characteristics that must be fulfilled to classify something as fake news as opposed to other falsehoods, bad journalism, or simply mistakes in communication. As shown in Table 1, we argue that a message should only be

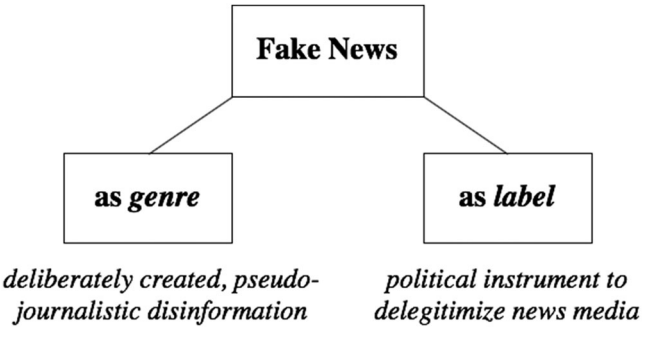

Figure 1. Fake news distinction.

Table 1. Overview of characteristics in fake news definitions.

Authors	Definition	Characteristics
Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213)	'We define "fake news" to be news articles that are *intentionally* and **verifiably false and could mislead readers**.'	1, 2, 3
Bakir and McStay (2018, p. 154)	'we define fake news **as either wholly false** or containing *deliberately* **misleading elements** incorporated within its content or context.'	1, 3
DiFranzo and Gloria-Garcia (2017, p. 34)	'Fake news is a (…) term for **false news stories** that are packaged and published as if they were genuine.'	1, 2
Guess et al. (2018, pp. 1–2)	'a new form of political **misinformation** that features prominently in journalistic accounts of the 2016 U.S. presidential election'	1
Horne and Adalı (2017, p. 1)	'an underlying assumption in fake news discussion is that it is written to look like real news, fooling the reader (…). Fake news in contrast has the *intention to deceive*, **making the reader believe it is correct**.'	1, 2, 3
Lazer et al. (2017, p. 4)	'Here we define fake news as **misinformation** that has the trappings of traditional news media, with the presumed associated editorial processes'	1, 2
Lazer et al. (2018, p. 1094)	'We define "fake news" to be **fabricated information** that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. (…) we view the defining element of fake news to be the *intent* and processes of the publisher.'	1, 2, 3
McNair (2017, p. 38)	'*Intentional* ***disinformation*** **(invention or falsification of known facts)** for *political and/or commercial purposes*, presented as real news.'	1, 2, 3
Mustafaraj and Metaxas (2017, p. 2)	'The term "fake news" refers to ***lies*** presented as news, that is, **falsehoods** online formatted and circulated in such a way that a reader might mistake them for legitimate news articles.'	1, 2, 3
Nelson and Taneja (2018, p. 3721)	'Now, the term more commonly refers to **false or misleading information** made to look like a factbased news story'	1, 2
Pennycook and Rand (2017, p. 2)	'**fabricated stories** presented as if from legitimate sources'	1, 2
Tandoc et al. (2018, pp. 147–148)	'Fake news (…) takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news (…) 'current definitions seem to focus (…) on **fabrications that are low in facticity** and *high in the immediate intention to deceive*.'	1, 2, 3

Characteristics: (1) **low in facticity (bold)**; (2) journalistic format (underline); (3) *intention to deceive (italic)*.

studied as 'fake news' when it is *low in facticity*, was created with the *intention to deceive*, and is presented in a *journalistic format*.

Most authors agree that fake news contains *false* information. For example, Wardle (2017) lists a variety of mis- and disinformation types that describe fake news, namely, news that contains 'false connection, false context, manipulated content, misleading content (…)'. Along the same lines, Bakir and McStay (2018, p. 157) describe fake news as 'either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context'. This means that the presence of facts does not disqualify a message as fake news, and that their content can be completely fabricated, but also only be partly untrue and paired with correct information. To date, no study has come up with a ratio of true to untrue information that describes when a message becomes 'fake'. Therefore, the currently most accurate way of labelling this content feature is provided by Tandoc, Lim, and Ling

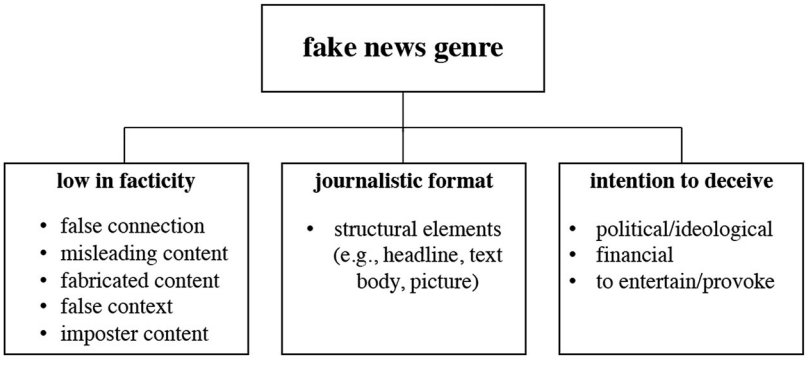

Figure 2. Characteristics of the fake news genre.

(2018), who state that fake news must be *low in facticity*, therefore implying that both fully as well as partly untrue messages can be fake news (see Figure 2).

Next, most authors argue that fake news 'mimics news media content in form' (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094) and is thus presented in a *journalistic format*. Considering the literal meaning of 'fake', as 'not genuine; imitation or counterfeit,' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019), fake news does not simply mean false news but should be understood as an *imitation of news*. Thus, fake news consists of similar structural components: a headline, a text body, and (however, not necessarily) a picture (e.g. Horne & Adalı, 2017). Although most studies do not consider these forms (for an exception, see Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016), journalistic presentation can also involve video and radio news formats.[1] By doing so, the information is presented under the false pretence that it resulted from journalistic research that follows certain professional standards, which means that fake news may be described as pseudojournalistic (see Figure 2). As a result, recipients might misattribute fake news articles as genuine and credible news articles (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). Importantly, Tandoc and colleagues note that, apart from the visual appearance of a news article, 'through the use of news bots, fake news imitates news' omnipresence by building a network of fake sites' (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 147).

Based on the assumption that no one inadvertently produces inaccurate information in the style of news articles, we also suggest – in line with several scholars – that the fake news genre is *created deliberately with an intention to deceive* (see Figure 2). Arguably, this can be seen as a 'defining element of fake news' (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1095). Most scholars agree that the main motivations for deception are either political/ideological or financial (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; McNair, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). However, it is also possible that fake news is created for humorous reasons, to entertain, or as Wardle (2017) dubs it, 'to provoke'. In the context of intent, it is important to distinguish between two different processes: the creation of fake news and its dissemination (see also Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The creation of the fake news genre is always intentional, while the dissemination may be unintentional.

When thinking of this third characteristic, some thoughts on the potential source of fake news are warranted. The most obvious source of fake news are websites that are developed and 'dedicated solely to propagating fake news' (Vargo et al., 2018, p. 2031). These websites have names that imitate those of established news outlets (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), e.g. 'The Political Insider' or 'The Denver Guardian'.[2] They are pseudojournalistic and short-lived, as 'they do not attempt to build a long-term reputation for quality, but rather maximize the short-run profits from attracting clicks in an initial period' (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, pp. 218–19). While some websites emerged earlier, in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a 'tipping point' was reached, and a large amount of fake news originated from these sites (Brennen, 2017, p. 180). By pretending to be legitimate news sources, these websites also perform with the intention to deceive their users.

Existing studies, however, have also considered satirical, alternative and partisan, pro-governmental, and mainstream journalism as sources of fake news (e.g. Bakir & McStay, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Tambini, 2017). Additionally, public conceptions of the term include 'poor journalism', native advertising, and propaganda outlets (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). So, do some

Table 2. Overview of how sources meet the conditions required to call their content 'fake news'.

	Low level of facticity	Intention to deceive	Journalistic format
Native advertising	O	Π	Π
News satire	O	O	Π
News parody	Π	O	Π
'Poor' journalistic outlets	Π	Π/O[1]	Π
Pseudo-journalistic fake news websites	Π	Π	Π

Notes: [1] false information stemming from 'poor' journalistic sources can originate from unintentional behaviour (i.e. *false news*), however also from intentional behaviour (i.e. *fake news*).
Π = characteristic met.
O = characteristic not met.

of the sources meet the above three characteristics (see Table 2)? *Political satire* presents factual information in the format of a TV news broadcast and makes deviations from truth and objectivity known (Baym, 2005; Tandoc et al., 2018). It is thus neither low in facticity nor created with the intention to deceive (see also HLEG, 2018). *News parody*, on the other hand, includes nonfactual information presented in the form of news articles (Tandoc et al., 2018). It thus deliberately distorts facts *for amusement*, not because it has the intention to deceive. News parody relies on the implicit assumption that the audience knows that the content is not true (Tandoc et al., 2018).[3] Consequently, satire and news parody should be excluded from the current understanding of fake news (Baym, 2005; Borden & Tew, 2007; McNair, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). Next is *native advertising* (i.e. advertising that is presented as news reports in news media), which is created with the intention to deceive its audience to think they read a professionally researched journalistic product. However, native advertising is mostly factual (although focusing on positive information about the advertised article) (Tandoc et al., 2018); thus, it is not necessarily low in facticity. Consequently, native advertising does not fulfil all characteristics, and we therefore exclude it from the fake news genre. Another term that has been named as a source of fake news is *'poor' or 'bad' journalism*, stemming from mainstream, alternative, partisan, or state-owned media. Journalists might introduce false information into media coverage by mistake because they believe it to be true (i.e. misperceptions) due to time pressure or too little editorial resources. However, those flaws are 'not fake news, but consequence of the fact that journalism is a creative cultural practice undertaken by human beings in all their frailty and imperfection' (McNair, 2017, p. 23). However, naturally, it is also possible that journalists deliberately distort facts and indeed have a personal or even organizational intention to deceive. On a personal level, this intention to deceive is difficult to estimate. Organizational deception among media with a track record of professional journalistic reporting may be possible. For example, studies could investigate, over time, if outlets repeatedly publish falsehoods on the same topic, without publishing rectifications. If an intention to deceive is shown, the term 'poor' journalism no longer applies, and the term fake news seems appropriate.

In conclusion, the third characteristic, intention to deceive, is the most challenging to grasp from a scholarly standpoint. While we consider the intention to deceive as inherently given in regard to pseudojournalistic fake news websites, we suggest that determining this intentionality for journalistic sources is a crucial challenge for future research. Moreover, an increasing number of scholars remark that the term fake news is insufficient in describing different types of disinformation (e.g. HLEG, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). We agree that a strict limitation on the use of this term is necessary, as terming everything connected to the much larger trend of disinformation in public life as 'fake news' simply contributes to the normalization of the fake news label as a political instrument, which – as we will elaborate on below – has detrimental consequences for democracies. Thus, we strongly recommend using the term fake news only when all three above-mentioned characteristics are met.[4]

How the fake news genre relates to other concepts

In the following, we embed the fake news genre within the comprehensive existing political communication literature. We show that, while it is of course not new in its essence, it represents a highly visible symptom of the longstanding increase in disinformation. Specifically, we refer to research on propaganda (Howard, Bolsover, Bradshaw, Kollanyi, & Neudert, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Wardle, 2017), misinformation and disinformation (e.g. Lazer et al., 2017), rumours (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), and conspiracy theories (e.g. McNair, 2017).

Propaganda describes a specific and overarching class of communication that can be described as 'the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014, p. 7). In that way, *any* information – accurate or not – can be applied for propagandistic ambitions, and propagandists can be both a 'state and non-state political actor' (Neudert, 2017, p. 4). As

opposed to the practice of persuasion, the true purpose of propaganda stays concealed. To achieve this purpose, propagandists aim to control the information flow, often by 'presenting distorted information from what appears to be a credible source' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014, p. 51). Importantly, in our context, by presenting false information in a journalistic format (e.g. stemming from a fake news website that resembles a medium or from a 'poor' journalistic source), the fake news genre can be applied for propagandistic intent. In this context, a study from Russia defines fake news as 'strategic narratives' from *Channel One*, a TV station owned by the Russian government (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Similarly, other authors have described fake news as 'pieces of propaganda' (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1867) or as one of many computational and/or digital 'instruments of a novel form of twenty-first century propaganda' (Neudert, 2017, p. 4).

Fake news is most often discussed in the context of studying *misinformation* and *disinformation*. While sometimes used synonymously, misinformation describes incorrect or misleading information that is disseminated *unintentionally*, while disinformation is incorrect or misleading information that is disseminated *deliberately* (e.g. Bakir & McStay, 2018; HLEG, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Thus, while both share the characteristic of the inaccuracy of content, they can be distinguished by their intent. This makes disinformation particularly relevant for understanding fake news, and current debates are often concerned with the increase in organized, technologically reinforced disinformation in modern societies (e.g. HLEG, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). This is the case because exposure to mis- and disinformation can lead to persistent misperceptions, which have been shown to be difficult to correct (for an overview of misperception research, see Flynn, Reifler, & Nyhan, 2017). Today, such misperceptions are discussed as one important and concerning trend in many democracies following the fake news debate, with consequences for politics and popular opinions about science and medicine.

Rumours and *conspiracy theories* are two other concepts that have been mentioned in the context of fake news. They both originate from content, which is 'unsupported by the best available evidence' (Flynn et al., 2017, p. 129), and can arise not only from mis- or disinformation (including the fake news genre) but also from information that might turn out to be true. *Rumours* are mainly characterized by their lack of evidence and their 'widespread social transmission' (Berinsky, 2017, p. 243). *Conspiracy theories* can be distinguished from rumours by their 'effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role' (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 205). Using oversimplification, conspiracy theories help people make sense of complex matters and offer a personified source (i.e. 'powerful people') of injustice and sorrow in the world (Bale, 2007), and can lead to misperceptions (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). Rumours and conspiracy theories were around long before the emergence of fake news (e.g. McNair, 2017), but fake news can be used to spread information that supports rumours and conspiracy theories (e.g. Douglas, Ang, & Deravi, 2017).

In summary, we can place the fake news genre most comfortably within the disinformation literature – if disinformation is packaged in a journalistic format, it emerges as fake news. Disinformation, however, exceeds the concept of fake news, as it also involves numerous forms 'that go well beyond anything resembling "news"' (HLEG, 2018, p. 10). The consequence of exposure to fake news is therefore misperceptions. Rumours and conspiracy theories can result from both accurate and incorrect content (including misinformation, disinformation, and the fake news genre). Fake news may be (and is) used for propagandistic purposes. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the discussed concepts.

Where does the fake news genre come from?

We can pinpoint a number of trends that have contributed to the rise of the fake news genre. Disinformation in political discourse is of course not new; however, the extent to which it occurs today appears to be growing (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Closely connected to the rise of the fake news debate are the challenges that the rise of the internet and social media present for modern democracies. In an online news

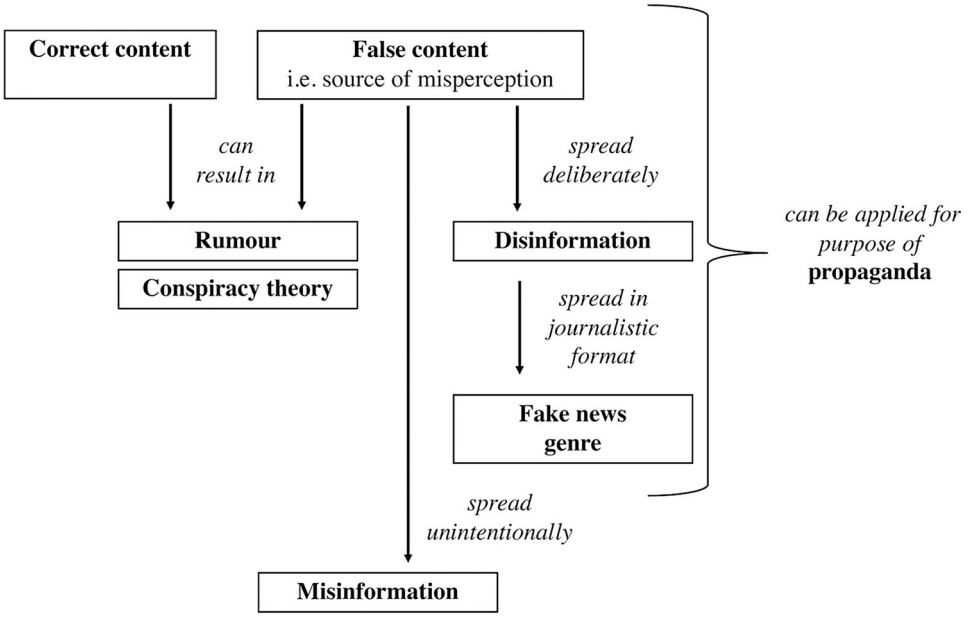

Figure 3. How the fake news genre relates to other concepts.

environment, information may be created and spread more cost-efficiently and quicker than ever before, and audiences are now able to participate in news production and dissemination processes (e.g. Lazer et al., 2018; McNair, 2017; Tong, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). As a result, classic selection mechanisms, such as trust in the gatekeeping function of professional journalism, are impaired (e.g. McNair, 2017; Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Starr, 2012) not only because it is increasingly challenging to differentiate between professional and unprofessional content (Stanford History Education Group, 2016) but also because journalists themselves are now challenged in properly verifying digital information during the news production process (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). This challenge puts the assessment of information credibility increasingly with an overwhelmed user (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & Mccann, 2003), and studies show that even so-called 'digital natives' struggle with evaluating online information (Stanford History Education Group, 2016). In addition, digital advertising makes fake news financially attractive, as views or 'clicks' instead of the accuracy of the content create business success (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Tambini, 2017). This idea links fake news to the emergence of *clickbait*, i.e. the creation of news content solely aimed at generating attention through sensational and emotionally appealing headlines (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

These technological developments are met by a number of social and political trends: most scholars connect the emergence of fake news to a larger crisis of trust in journalism (e.g. Lazer et al., 2018; McNair, 2017; Nielsen & Graves, 2017). While most prominently discussed in the U.S., where a recent poll found that media trust has dropped to 'a new low' (Swift, 2016), increasing mistrust towards news media is also a problem (in varying degrees) in other countries (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2017). Importantly, media trust is not decreasing for all citizens and rather has to be seen in the context of increasing political polarization. In the U.S., media perceptions are divided by partisanship, with Democrats having more positive attitudes towards the media than Republicans (e.g. Gottfried, Stocking, & Grieco, 2018; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017). In Western Europe, citizens holding populist views are more likely to have negative opinions of news media compared to those holding non-populist views (Mitchell et al., 2018). However, for some, decreasing trust in traditional journalism might lead to a higher acceptance of other information sources, including fake

news. Furthermore, increasing opinion polarization leads to homogenous networks, where opposing views are rare and the willingness to accept an ideology confirming news – true or false – is high (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Empirical evidence on the fake news genre

The fast-growing empirical literature on fake news can be divided into three broad categories: (1) investigations on how fake news occurs within public discourse, (2) studies interested in effects, and (3) those that investigate how the spread of fake news can be counteracted. Importantly, for this review, we focus on studies that specifically consider 'fake news'. In doing so, we repeatedly make connections to the related literature on mis- and disinformation, which provides the foundation for the study on the fake news genre (for overviews, see, e.g. Flynn et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Scholars interested in the occurrence of fake news in public discourse have investigated how many citizens such news actually reaches, its structure, the way it is spread on social media, and its content. In terms of its structure, fake news seems to be shorter and less informative than genuine news, using less complex and more personal language, and is likely to have longer titles, which contain the main claim of the article (Horne & Adalı, 2017). Fake news on social media is spread not only through social bots[5] (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017) but also by humans (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017).

Considering their content, Humprecht (2018) finds that in the U.S. and U.K., fake news stories predominantly focus on political actors, while in Germany and Austria, sensational content about refugees is dominating. The author concludes that fake news content is strongly influenced by domestic news agendas. Consequently, it is not surprising that in 2016, U.S. fake news stories featuring one of the presidential candidates were prevalent. Of these articles, those favouring Donald Trump were shared more often than those favouring Hillary Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Some fake news stories received more likes and shares than actual news stories on *Facebook* and *Twitter* (Howard et al., 2017; Silverman, 2016). However, shares and likes on social media do not equal the actual consumption of fake news (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). Several studies, therefore, have investigated how many citizens actually visited fake news sites in 2016 in the U.S. (Guess et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018), as well as in 2017 in France and Italy (Fletcher, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen, 2018). They consistently find that the actual audience of fake news sites is very limited in relation to the total U.S. population (Guess et al., 2018) and compared to the audience of established news sites in the U.S., France and Italy (Fletcher et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Furthermore, established news sites are not only visited by more citizens, but their visitors also spend more time compared to visitors of fake news sites (Fletcher et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Furthermore, the results suggest that *Facebook* plays a main role in encountering fake news (Guess et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018).

So far, there are only a few effect studies on fake news. The results suggest that many citizens struggle to identify fake news, with Republicans and heavy *Facebook* news users being more likely to believe that such news is accurate compared to Democrats and those who rely more on other news sources (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Furthermore, repeated exposure to fake news headlines has been shown to increase their perceived accuracy (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2017). However, while a survey in December 2016 finds that two-thirds of Americans believe that fake news has caused 'a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events' (Mitchell, Barthel, & Holcomb, 2016), on an aggregate level, scholars have argued that fake news did not substantively altered the outcome of the 2016 U.S. elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Other researchers focus on the role of fact-checking and computer-assisted methods to automatically detect fake news online. They find that there is simply less fact-checking compared to fake news content and that fact-checking is shared with a significant time delay after the spread of the original misinformation (Shao, Ciampaglia, Flammini, & Menczer, 2016). Moreover, 'disputed by 3rd-party fact-checkers' warnings on social media reduce the perceived accuracy of fake news stories only sparsely

(Pennycook & Rand, 2017), and fact-checking sites do not seem to influence the issue agenda of other media (Vargo et al., 2018). These results suggest that fact-checking is not sufficiently effective to tackle the fake news problem. Computer-assisted methods to automatically detect fake news are often connected to the so-called '*Fake News Challenge*' *(FNC-1)*, a competition encouraging the exploration of artificial intelligence technologies for finding automated ways to detect fake news. Several scholars have submitted promising methods; however, research on automated detection is still developing and, thus far, inconclusive (Pomerleau & Rao, 2016).

In summary, we know that the fake news genre differs in some crucial aspects from genuine news and that it is mainly disseminated through social media, where such news gains a lot of attention in terms of likes and shares. The actual audience for such fake news, however, appears to be more limited than first anticipated. Few studies have considered whether citizens perceive fake news to be accurate, but research on its effects on attitudes is lacking. Furthermore, fact-checking has only a limited effect, while research on automated detection is still in need of development. These findings are limited by the fact that most interdisciplinary studies have been conducted in the U.S. context and specifically in the context of the 2016 presidential election (except for Fletcher et al., 2018; Humprecht, 2018).

The 'fake news' label

Today, fake news has become a negatively charged buzzword, acting as a reminder of the increase in falsehoods in a digitalized and fragmented information environment. However, at the same time, this associated negativity has rendered the term a potent weapon for a number of political actors, who now use it to discredit legacy news media that contradict their positions, suggesting that these outlets are politically biased (e.g. Vosoughi et al., 2018). Consequently, such weaponization of the term fake news has become a part of political instrumentalization strategies with the goal of undermining public trust in institutional news media as central parts of democratic political systems. As a political instrument, the fake news label thus portrays news media as institutions that purposely spread disinformation with the intention to deceive (see also Albright, 2017).

Politicians criticizing the media for being biased are not new (e.g. Ladd, 2012). However, the extent to which this happens following the introduction of the fake news terminology is unprecedented (e.g. Guess et al., 2017; McNair, 2017). Furthermore, stating that news media and their coverage are not only ideologically biased or factually incorrect but also *fake* is important to understand. Journalistic authority, or the 'right to be listened to' (Carlson, 2017, p. 8), is thus contested. Contrary to the standards of democratic debates, scholars have argued that the fake news label is not accompanied by explanations of why the accused media coverage is inaccurate or biased (McNair, 2017). Consequently, the fake news label is not applied to critically evaluate the coverage of a medium but rather to attack the outlet's legitimacy (see also Lischka, 2019). Denner and Peter (2017, p. 275) suggest that the 'associated trivialization of a term carrying such negative connotations is problematic and could help to establish [it] as an unreflected designation for the media'. They speak of the German word 'Lügenpresse' (lying press), but the same holds true for the fake news label.

The most prominent example of this use of the term fake news is U.S. president Donald Trump, but it has also recently been applied by politicians in Austria, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Italy, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, the UK and many more (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018; RSF, 2017), highlighting its global significance.

The weaponization of the term fake news may have fundamental effects on the work of the news media beyond simple political debates. The United Nations and other observers of public life declared that they are '[a]larmed at instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including by stating that the media is "the opposition" or is "lying" and has a hidden political agenda' (UN et al., 2017, p. 1). Reporters Without Borders (2018) warn that increasing '[h]ostility towards the media, openly encouraged by political leaders (…) pose a threat to

democracies'. Additionally, scholars have noticed that publicly voiced media criticism by political actors is increasingly delegitimizing and to a greater extent characterized by hostility (e.g. Tong, 2018). Thus, the fake news label arguably represents the globally most visible symptom of a greater trend in political communication, namely, an *increase in delegitimizing media criticism by political actors*.

Such criticism goes hand in hand with other and well-known attempts to delegitimize journalism, such as when politicians deny 'critical' media access to press briefings (e.g. U.S. president Trump; Siddiqui, 2017) or generally restrict communication with them (e.g. Austria's interior ministry; Mösenedder, 2018). This delegitimization impedes the public function of journalism, the nature of political discourse, and the democratic process in general (e.g. Matthes, Maurer, & Arendt, 2019; Pfetsch, 2004; Tsfati, 2014). This increasing political antagonism is also likely to have a direct effect on journalists' work. For example, a number of authoritarian leaders use the terminology of a 'fight against fake news' to justify their censorship policies (RSF, 2017). Moreover, verbal attacks might also affect journalists in terms of self-censorship for fear of criticism. Self-censorship can 'occur when a decision to suppress information is made within the media organization, but as a result of pressure from the outside' (George, 2018, p. 480). Importantly in this context, a survey of journalists in Sweden – a country with stable press freedom – recently showed that verbal threats and abusive comments indeed lead to journalists avoiding certain topics or actors in their coverage (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016).

Furthermore, considering the importance of elite rhetoric for opinion formation, political media criticism might influence how citizens perceive the media (e.g. Ladd, 2012). Research shows that political attacks can increase perceptions of media bias (Smith, 2010) and decrease levels of media trust (Ladd, 2012).

How the fake news label relates to other concepts

The weaponized fake news label can be understood in the context of existing theories of political communication. As stated above, *propaganda* can be characterized as a form of communication that aims at shaping public opinion in a way that gratifies the propagandist's concealed agenda (e.g. Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014). One way to influence public opinion is through 'controlling the media as a source of information distribution' (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2014, p. 51). In this sense, the fake news label may be understood as an attempt to control the *media's influence* on the public.

Similarly, the fake news label can be connected to research on *media criticism*, understood as a non-academic critique of journalism. Media criticism can be seen as a substantial part of *metajournalistic discourse*, i.e. publicly verbalized evaluations of the quality of journalistic processes and products. Within metajournalistic discourse, actors inside and outside of journalism compete over the definitions, boundaries, and legitimacy of journalism (Carlson, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Media criticism – in its ideal state – has a democratic function, as it serves to evaluate media quality and to control if the media is fulfilling its role in democratic societies (Carey, 1974; Carlson, 2018; Wyatt, 2007). Here, criticism is used to deprecate violations of journalistic norms and differentiate them from 'good' journalism, reinforcing the legitimacy of journalism at large (Carlson, 2009). To be 'democratic' or legitimizing, media criticism requires an *explicit argumentation* of why the medium or the journalistic product is being criticized. Accusations of failure necessitate an articulation of the associated standards that are not met (Carey, 1974; Carlson, 2017). Moreover, some scholars argue that this criticism needs to be expressed in an *unemotional language* (Carey, 1974). Only then, 'criticism is not the mark of failure and irrelevance [but] the sign of vigor and importance' (Carey, 1974, p. 240), maintaining the legitimacy of journalism as an integral part of democracy. Importantly, journalists also prefer civil and substantiated criticism (Cheruiyot, 2018). Consequently, this criticism has a greater potential to affect change in journalism.

However, this is not the rule for how most media criticism is expressed in current political discourse. Rather, media criticism is increasingly combative, with critics attacking the media to implement changes in reporting (Carlson, 2017). Criticism by politicians is increasingly characterized

by hostility and incivility (e.g. Krämer, 2018; Tong, 2018; RSF, 2018), and incidents of humiliation and intimidation by public authorities are on the rise (Clark & Grech, 2017). While political leaders have regularly and openly criticized the media for decades – a prominent example is Richard Nixon – the intensity of antagonism that is expressed by politicians today is unprecedented (Carlson, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

In particular, the labels 'fake news' and 'lying press' are inherently uncivil, as lying accusations are considered a form of *incivility* (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). The major purpose of incivility is to discourage others from 'frankly expressing their opinions and thus to obstruct an open and productive debate' (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018, p. 66). Therefore, criticism that is expressed in an emotional and uncivil language does not strive for constructively evaluating media quality in terms of its democratic value. Instead, it can be seen as an attempt to delegitimize the opponent (Chilton, 2004).

Furthermore, political criticism is often expressed without argumentation on what grounds the critique is built on. Politicians particularly use media criticism as a strategy when confronted with negative coverage of their persona or actions (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & van Praag, 2010; Smith, 2010). In the same vein, political actors currently attack critical news media with the terms 'fake news' and 'lying press', without substantiating why a medium is 'fake' or 'lying'. However, 'attack is not criticism' (Carey, 1974, p. 235), and charges of inadequacy always necessitate a clear description of 'a corresponding ideal that is not being met' (Carlson, 2017, p. 165).

Consequently, the nature of the current criticism predominantly deviates from legitimizing or democratic criticism as described above, as it is often expressed in an emotional, uncivil language and without argumentation. Its purpose is not to critically evaluate the quality of journalism to preserve it; rather, its purpose is to attack journalism's legitimacy. Thus, we term this type of expression of disapproval as *delegitimizing media criticism* and identify the fake news label (as well as lying press accusations in German-speaking countries) as its currently most prominent manifestation.

Where does the fake news label come from?

We can trace the weaponization of the fake news label back to the emergence of digital media and changes in the political architecture of modern media democracies. In today's fragmented and digital media environment, journalists and other information producers are competing over the public's attention, and the criticism of the mainstream media and professional journalism as perhaps outdated and disconnected elitist ivory towers by alternative media, bloggers, and citizens seems increasingly common (e.g. Carlson, 2009; Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012). This mechanism is strengthened by information flows on social media platforms, where news stories are increasingly shared alongside critical commentary on the performance of the media (Carlson, 2016). On these platforms, citizens have become aware of how easy it is to manipulate information. Realizing this potential of manipulation has likely supported public assumptions that journalists are also using deceptive techniques of information manipulation online (Neverla, 2017).

Furthermore, the rise of social media also means that politicians can now circumvent journalistic gatekeeping and talk directly to the public, and they are no longer checked for their use of media criticism as a means of gathering voter support (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Tong, 2018). Media criticism is particularly popular within a rising type of populist parties in democracies (e.g. McNair, 2017; Tambini, 2017). Modern populist communication strategies are indeed characterized by an anti-elitism directed at the media, and such modern populists have rendered growing media criticism and anti-media discourse a fixed feature of their rhetoric for years now (De Vreese, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Calling the media 'fake news' can thus be seen as yet another characteristic element of populist political communication, indicating the news media as being 'pro-elite' and undermining opposition and journalism's role as the fourth estate (Krämer, 2018; McNair, 2017; Tambini, 2017). In recent years, studies have shown that populist media criticism is growing

(Engesser et al., 2017; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018; Holt & Haller, 2017) and now 'belongs to the standard repertoire of populist parties' (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2016, p. 376).

Further connected with the rise of populism and the crisis of journalism is an increasing depreciation of 'elites', in general (McNair, 2017), and those who are commissioned with the provision of factual information (i.e. scientists and politicians), specifically (e.g. Mooney & Kirshenbaum, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Additionally, increasing levels of political polarization in many democracies seem to promote a mainstream climate of opinion that is characterized by few shared facts and disrespect for other worldviews. Such polarization can be connected to what has been termed an 'increasing relativism of facts' or 'post-truth politics', a trend in political communication where factual evidence is seen as less important than personal opinion, with public actors increasingly denying factual information (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Using the term 'fake news' is one form of this worrying trend. In doing so, the basic ground rules of political decision-making are changed by moving beyond the 'cliché that all politicians lie and make promises they have no intention of keeping – this still expects honesty to be the default position. In a post-truth world, this expectation no longer holds' (Higgins, 2016, p. 9).

In summary, the news media is afflicted by a culture of permanent criticism in a digitalized political discourse and a new class of populist politicians, who attack journalists at a time when they are economically and socially vulnerable. Anti-elitist tendencies in many Western democracies have made way for public doubts as to the performance of the fundamental institutions that uphold these democracies, such as science, politics and journalism. The use of the fake news label is a further symptom of this affliction.

Empirical evidence on the fake news label

The fake news label has been considered by only a few studies thus far. Lischka (2019) analyses how *The New York Times (NYT)* reports on fake news accusations by Donald Trump and finds that the newspaper understands those accusations as an attack on their journalistic legitimacy. While there are attempts to defend journalism's legitimacy in general, the NYT misses the chance to explicitly defend its own legitimacy. Similarly, Denner and Peter (2017) analyse how German newspapers reflect on the lying press allegations and find that outlets fail to elaborate on these attacks and do not sufficiently demonstrate the media's democratic importance. Moreover, in some cases, journalists even apply the term to ironically describe themselves.

In regard to effects, the research seems to suggest that exposure to elite discourse about fake news has the potential to decrease citizens' trust in news media (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Moreover, a fake news attack by President Trump has no effect on respondents who disapprove of Trump but significantly reduces perceived media accuracy and media trust for Trump supporters (Guess et al., 2017).

Therefore, while there is growing concern, we see that there is a dearth of studies on the label. However, the few studies focusing on that side show that fake news is not only about an increase in false information but also about a crisis of how the news media is perceived. Such studies also show that the fake news label potentially influences citizens' levels of media trust. While some journalists seem to be aware of that dimension of the fake news phenomenon, they mostly fail to distance themselves from such allegations and to defend their legitimacy.

Research agenda

Studying fake news is truly about understanding two distinctive phenomena: first, it is about an increase in disinformation that appears in journalistic format, and second, it is about an instrumentalization of the term and its inherent negative connotation to delegitimize news media. Consequently, these two dimensions have distinct consequences and require different scientific approaches.

The fake news genre

First, as shown above, the empirical research on fake news is heavily focused on U.S. media and politics, with some exceptions from Western Europe. However, as a recent poll shows, exposure to fake news stories is likely prevalent in Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Turkey (Newman et al., 2018). Furthermore, fake news is widely discussed in many other parts of the world, such as South Africa (Wasserman, 2017) and India (Bhaskaran, Mishra, & Nair, 2017). Importantly, Wasserman (2017, p. 3) argues, 'News – whether "fake" or "real" – should not be understood outside of its particular contexts of production and consumption'. Indeed, journalism differs around the globe. For example, studies show that there are differences in journalists' approaches to ethical principles and the way they understand their social function between Western contexts and developing or authoritarian contexts (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Similarly, fake news might constitute different problems within different country contexts as well. For instance, in India, a larger problem than citizens falling for fake news articles online is that journalists increasingly cover the false information propagated by political actors (Bhaskaran et al., 2017). These examples quite simply point to the need to investigate the fake news genre both in specific country case studies and in a cross-national comparative manner outside of the Western contexts, in general, and the U.S. context, specifically.

Second, future studies must shed light on how exactly journalistic characteristics and instruments are used to produce fake news. Along these lines, we do not know who was behind the creation of many fake news websites during past election campaigns or in routine periods and what their motivations were. Here, systematic and large-scale content analyses of fake news websites are needed. The partisan media might play a role in the dissemination of fake news; however, this link remains speculative (e.g. Vargo et al., 2018). Research on the actual reach of fake news is also both limited to and heavily focused on the U.S. (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018), with the exception of one study considering fake news in France and Italy (Fletcher et al., 2018).

Third, most studies focus on content and reach of fake news, neglecting its possible effects. As we conceptualize fake news as a form of disinformation, it likely leads to misperceptions with politically relevant consequences (Lazer et al., 2017). Misperceptions are easily formed, often after first exposure (Cook, Ecker, & Lewandowsky, 2015). If disinformation is perceived to be a result of journalistic practice, citizens might evaluate content less critically. Consequently, future studies must not merely test whether citizens perceive fake news to be real but, more importantly, whether presenting disinformation in a pseudojournalistic manner actually leads to different or even stronger misperceptions than false information that appears in non-journalistic formats. Furthermore, it has been shown that political mis- and disinformation continuously affect attitudes even after they have been corrected (Thorson, 2016). A possible explanation for this is that invalidated pieces of information stay accessible in memory and thus are still available when citizens try to explain unfolding events (Cook et al., 2015). In that way, even fake news articles that have been disputed by fact-checkers might result in political misperceptions. These ideas, as well as the longevity of such effects (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2016), are in need of investigation. An important next step would be to test how misperceptions stemming from fake news might affect political behaviour in the long run (Lazer et al., 2018). In addition, it has been suggested that fake news is targeted at emotions (Bakir & McStay, 2018). This suggestion first requires quantitative empirical testing. Then, in line with the research focusing on the psychological processes that explain news effects (e.g. Lecheler, Schuck, & De Vreese, 2013), studies might test if the fake news effects on misperceptions are made possible through cognitive *and* affective processing.

Research on the computer-assisted detection of fake news and disinformation in general is essential but could also be paired with research on enhancing media literacy in the digital information environment for citizens directly (McNair, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). We also suggest that existing approaches to enhance media literacy, such as *Facebook*'s guide, 'Tips how to spot false news' (e.g. Thomas, 2017), need to be evaluated.

These suggested avenues for future research refer to content that assuredly meets all three fake news characteristics. However, as stated above, the intentionality of fake news production – as a distinguishing characteristic – is difficult to study. Thus, research methods are required that can capture malicious intent in news production. As already mentioned, investigating outlets' coverage over time and tracking if they publish errata about inaccurate reports might be a first step. Another possibility might lie in reconstructive interviews, which aim to identify the processes of how journalists create news stories (Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018). Applying this method might identify fake news from sources such as alternative media outlets, partisan media outlets, and mainstream media outlets. We see a great need for research on the effects of not only intentionally but also unintentionally created false news from these outlets, as well-known outlets have a much larger readership (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2018) and probably enjoy higher levels of perceived credibility (e.g. Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Consequently, mis- and disinformation presented in these formats are likely to lead to stronger misperceptions compared to information stemming from fake news sites. However, this research should not be undertaken under the name of fake news until it is proven that the content meets all three fake news characteristics.

The fake news label

The crucial areas for research on the label cover (a) the general nature of the application of the fake news label, (b) how journalism is affected by and reacts to such a label, and (c) what it entails for citizens.

First, we urgently need more empirical evidence on the occurrence of the fake news label, for example, whether it is predominantly applied to single news articles and media outlets or generalized to 'the media', to weaken it as a pillar of democracy. In this context, we want to stress again that the fake news label is only the most visible symptom of public attacks on journalistic legitimacy. We have also discussed the 'lying press' accusations in this context, but we lack knowledge on what attempts to delegitimize news and journalism look like beyond these prominent buzzwords. Additionally, it is suggested that these journalism-delegitimizing attempts have been increasing in recent years, an assumption that requires descriptive analyses over time. Furthermore, while there are first hints that the fake news label is a global phenomenon, future research needs to investigate to what extent the label and related attacks are actually employed by political actors other than U.S. president Donald Trump and whether the idea that populist politics are its main driver truly holds across case studies and countries.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for more research on how journalism responds to those attacks on its legitimacy. In times where 'skepticism has become the culturally accepted perspective when confronted with questions about believing the news' (Carlson, 2017, p. 178), it is crucial that journalists not only actively distance themselves from delegitimizing attacks but also accept and react to constructive criticism. While there are content analyses on the reactions of a few outlets (Denner & Peter, 2017; Lischka, 2019), we need a broader picture. Furthermore, we see a crucial need for research with journalists: are journalists aware of the instrumentalization, and can information about this prevent them from using these terms so often and – importantly – against themselves? Moreover, as Lischka (2019) notices, there is a need to experimentally test how convincing readers find newspapers' reactions to those attacks and which relegitimization strategies are effective. Additionally, it remains an open question if news outlets (especially partisan and alternative media) themselves participate in attempts to delegitimize (other) news media. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, it is important to understand how the inherent hostility of the fake news label and other delegitimizing strategies affect journalists and their work practices, for example, in terms of self-censorship.

We further suggest that studies test whether the fake news label and related journalism-delegitimizing attacks by politicians have an impact on how citizens perceive the media. As elite rhetoric is a powerful factor influencing the formation of opinion, political elite attacks on the media have an

impact on how citizens perceive such media (Ladd, 2012). When used by political elites, the fake news label – as well as other delegitimizing attacks – might consequently affect citizens' media perceptions. As shown above, an experiment provides the first indications that the fake news label, applied by U.S. President Trump, decreases the media trust of Trump supporters (Guess et al., 2017). Thus, it can be assumed that the effectiveness of the label depends on the shared political ideology with the source it is coming from (see also Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). Interestingly, in this context, *The New York Times*, for example, claims that since President Trump's fake news accusation, there actually has been an increase in subscriptions to the newspaper (Chapman, 2017). Therefore, a further possibility is that the fake news label does not reduce but actually increases media trust, especially for citizens who do not support Donald Trump. For those reasons, the fake news label may even backfire and reduce the credibility of the political actor using it. Thus, research is needed to test whether the effect found by Guess et al. (2017) holds when the fake news label or other attacks on journalism's legitimacy come from other politicians. Furthermore, studies need to investigate the fake news label's impact on media perceptions outside of the U.S., as concern about the usage of the term fake news is growing around the world, even more so in Austria (56%) and Bulgaria (53%) than in the U.S. (48%) (Newman et al., 2018, pp. 37–38).

Moreover, we need a test of the possible moderating and mediating factors of such effects, as they will likely depend on citizens' general political trust (e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2018) and emotions (e.g. Wirz, 2018). This test will allow for the development of a comprehensive model of the effects of the fake news label. Finally, while a first qualitative study indicates that citizens are aware of the instrumentalization of the term (Nielsen & Graves, 2017), we lack quantitative studies confirming this finding, as well as how being aware of such instrumentalization affects the label's impact on media perceptions.

Considering both the label and the genre, we suggest that there should be a focus on counteracting detrimental effects. First, there may be more effective ways to reduce misperceptions, in general, and to weaken the effects of the fake news genre, in particular. For instance, providing a correction from a source with shared political ideology might reduce misperceptions (see also Lazer et al., 2017). Second, as noted by several scholars, one of the currently most pressing questions is how trust in news media can be reinforced (e.g. McNair, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Here, a possibility could be to test how politicians' statements concerning media outlets' credibility might increase levels of trust in these outlets for citizens who support these politicians. Furthermore, future research should investigate whether 'constructive journalism' – an innovative approach where journalists deviate from focusing on negative and conflict news (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017) – has a positive effect on media trust.

Concluding remarks

The excessive use of the term fake news in public discourse has driven a number of scholars and public officials to suggest that it should be retired (HLEG, 2018; House of Commons, 2018; Sullivan, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While we agree with the concerns regarding the term, considering its prominence and large range, this retirement might not be within the limits of scholarly influence. This paper aims to calm troubled water by providing a concise review and systematization of the available empirical and theoretical literature on this phenomenon to clarify what it actually means for political communication environments. We suggest that fake news is a two-dimensional phenomenon: there is the fake news genre, relating to *the intentional creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation*, and there is the fake news label, describing *the political instrumentalization of the term by political actors to delegitimize journalism and news media*.

Neither dimension is likely to completely disappear; thus, a distinction may at least help to classify different trends in modern political communication for future research. The fake news genre is probably the most visible symptom of an *increase in disinformation in the online information environment*. Fake news potentially leads to misperceptions and contributes to 'growing inequalities in political

knowledge', one of the most pressing challenges for democracy today (Van Aelst et al., 2017, p. 19). The use of the term as a label to ensure *delegitimizing media criticism* possibly affects how citizens perceive journalism in terms of accuracy and credibility. This effect matters because media perceptions shape citizens' use of news media and how they are affected by such media (Tsfati, 2014). The use of the term as a label might thus 'driv[e] audiences away to other news sources' and contribute to political polarization (Carlson, 2017, p. 179) – yet another crucial challenge for democracy (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Furthermore, the label applied against accurate news coverage relates to 'increasing relativism of facts' (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In that context, the fake news label might spread to science: a recently emerged debate about 'predatory publishers' is employing the hashtag '#FakeScience' (Heller, 2018). If this term gains comparable attention to that of fake news, it might soon be turned and used to label honest and institutionally supported scientific studies as 'fake science'.

Our review of the literature shows that both dimensions of fake news are damaging to journalism as a whole. Because it is dangerous, we want to conclude this review by urging scholars to use the term more carefully in their own work going forward. First, the term should not be applied to any unverified journalistic products. Inaccurate news for which it cannot be determined if it was created deliberately could thus simply be called 'false news'. Furthermore, scholars should think twice about how necessary the term is when analysing mis- and disinformation in general. In line with several other authors (HLEG, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), we argue that the term fake news is not applicable to capture all phenomena of falsehood in the news environment. This term describes two very specific instances of a crisis in democracy and must not be normalized to a much wider discourse.

Notes

1. E.g. with the help of new audio and video manipulation tools: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/26/fake-news-obama-video-trump-face2face-doctored-content.
2. These are two of the fake news websites that spread misinformation related to the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Silverman, 2016).
3. However, this requires the source of news parody to reveal that its content is meant to be understood humorously. For example, *The Onion* states on its website that satire and parody are 'a form of free speech and expression' (https://www.theonion.com/about).
4. Of course, limiting the usage of the term fake news does not mean that content that does not meet all three characteristics is harmless. False information of any kind can of course have detrimental consequences. Our objective, however, is to limit the use of the term fake news to lessen its power as a political instrument (i.e. fake news label).
5. i.e. software-controlled social media accounts that automatically interact with other users (e.g., Howard et al., 2017).

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From Novelty to Normalization? How Journalists Use the Term "Fake News" in their Reporting

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ABSTRACT

During recent years, worries about fake news have been a salient aspect of mediated debates. However, the ubiquitous and fuzzy usage of the term in news reporting has led more and more scholars and other public actors to call for its abandonment in public discourse altogether. Given this status as a controversial but arguably effective buzzword in news coverage, we know surprisingly little about exactly how journalists use the term in their reporting. By means of a quantitative content analysis, this study offers empirical evidence on this question. Using the case of Austria, where discussions around fake news have been ubiquitous during recent years, we analyzed all news articles mentioning the term "fake news" in major daily newspapers between 2015 and 2018 ($N = 2{,}967$). We find that journalistic reporting on fake news shifts over time from mainly describing the threat of disinformation online, to a more normalized and broad usage of the term in relation to attacks on legacy news media. Furthermore, news reports increasingly use the term in contexts completely unrelated to disinformation or media attacks. In using the term this way, journalists arguably contribute not only to term salience but also to a questionable normalization process.

KEYWORDS

Fake news; disinformation; delegitimization; news; journalism; content analysis

The term "fake news" is a global buzzword—used frequently by some, loathed by others (e.g., McNair 2017). While originally used as a niche term by communication scholars to describe formats of political satire (e.g., Baym 2005), it has since 2016 come to characterize a variety of phenomena related to questions of truth and factuality in journalism and political communication. In response to this new scope of the term's usage, scholars have begun to design conceptual and operational definitions of the term "fake news" (e.g., Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). These definitions suggest that, essentially, the term stands for two major challenges to modern democracies. On the one hand, it is used to describe disinformation that masquerades as news articles and is often spread online (e.g., Lazer et al. 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). On the other hand, an increasing number of

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political actors have begun to use the term to discredit legacy news media (e.g., Lischka 2019), with the potential to decrease citizens' levels of media trust (e.g., Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019), therefore, suggest distinguishing between fake news as a *genre* of disinformation and the fake news *label* as a political instrument to delegitimize journalism (but see also McNair 2017).

While our scholarly view of the causes and consequences of fake news has become clearer, we lack empirical evidence on how the debate around fake news manifests itself in social reality. At this moment, all we know is that there is rising criticism regarding the frequent and fuzzy public use of the term (e.g., Habgood-Coote 2019), seen as problematic because the overuse of the term by news media and other public actors may already render it more important in people's minds than it actually is. Furthermore, increased salience alone might lead to a normalization of the term, rendering its meaning equal to anything that is false. Trivializing a term that clearly has a negative connotation could further encourage its use "as an unreflected designation for the media".

Before we can move to understand these effects, we must first collect empirical evidence on the nature of the fake news debate itself. Journalists face a dilemma when it comes to using the term "fake news" in their reporting. While some might be aware of the worries about the term (e.g., Badshah 2018), it also functions as an effective cue in news reporting to increase audience interest and engagement. However, so far there is only limited evidence of how journalists actually use the term in their reporting. We study the case of Austria, a country where fake news debates have been frequent, and where a number of political actors have used the term in political discourse. Thereby, we provide a European perspective on the journalistic use of the fake news terminology. By means of a content analysis of all fake news-related articles in eight major newspapers, we show how journalistic use of the term has developed during recent years. Additionally, we investigate how fuzzy or concrete journalists' use of the term is in describing disinformation threats and media-critical debates where the term is used to attack journalism. By looking into fake news as a multidimensional concept, we (a) test how applicable theoretical distinctions of different fake news dimensions are in public discourse and (b) provide first answers to the question of whether journalists are perhaps normalizing a term that is used against them by critical political elites.

Fake News: One Term, Three Concepts

The term "fake news" has been described as "problematic," "ambiguous," "inadequate and misleading," and "unhelpful" (Albright 2017; DiFranzo and Gloria-Garcia 2017; HLEG 2018; Wardle 2017). This is, in large part, related to the fact that the term does not have one fixed meaning (Habgood-Coote 2019). However, by and large, research on fake news refers to one of three contexts in which the term is used: First, fake news as a *genre* of disinformation online; second, the weaponization of the term by critical political actors as a *label* to delegitimize news media (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019); and third, "fake news" is also seen as an empty *buzzword*, simply used to describe something as false or bad (e.g., Habgood-Coote 2019).

The Fake News Genre

While originally the term "fake news" was used to describe formats of political satire (e.g., Baym 2005), during the 2016 US presidential elections, scholars and journalists adapted it

to characterize made-up news articles (e.g., Mourão and Robertson 2019; Silverman 2016), such as for the infamous "pizzagate" story. Since then, these stories have spiraled into a salient public debate, in which citizens, politicians, journalists, and scholars have shared their concerns about the possibly detrimental influence of fake news on political events. Also since 2016, a growing number of studies have offered theoretical clarifications and definitional characteristics of the concept, mostly characterizing it as a form of disinformation (e.g., Lazer et al. 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Disinformation—in contrast to misinformation—is "false, inaccurate, or misleading information" that is created *intentionally* (HLEG 2018, 10). This means that fake news consists of factually incorrect information that is created intentionally, distinguishing it from inaccurate information that is generated unknowingly or by mistake.[1] Furthermore, fake news is characterized by its resemblance to news (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Lazer et al. 2018; McNair 2017; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018).

The Fake News Label

However, the term "fake news" has also become important when studying media criticism. US President Donald Trump successfully redirected a public debate about disinformation and democracies by labeling legacy outlets as "fake news." This was effective, as the term already had an inherent connotation as a potentially dangerous development in modern democracies. By using the term against news outlets, Trump (and with him several other politicians in a number of countries) were thus "borrowing some of the phrase's original power" (Kurtzleben 2017, para. 17). As such, the fake news label is used by political leaders to "muzzle the media on the pretext of fighting false information" and thereby defending censorship (RSF 2017, para. 1). These actors are also almost always labeled as populists, as one of the core attributes of populism is anti-elitism discourse, which can be directed at political elites but also against the media (e.g., De Vreese 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Krämer 2018). For example, in many European countries, such as Austria, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, verbal attacks on the media by populist politicians are increasing (RSF 2018a).

The Empty Buzzword

Beyond these two meanings of the term, however, we can observe a third trend: Increasingly, the "fake news" term has become a way of stating that something is incorrect or debatable. It has become "elastic to a fault" (Mourão and Robertson 2019, 1). For example, some scholars are using the term as a catchy academic title element in articles that are unconnected to disinformation, media criticism, or communication in general (e.g., "Is Successful Brain Training Fake News?" Fitzgerald 2017). Others use it as a means to describe the current time period (e.g., "the 'Fake News' Era"; Berghel 2017), where facts increasingly seem to be contested, relating to terms like "post-truth" and "alternative facts." Therefore, the term "fake news" has become part of a larger debate about epistemic instability. In this context, some scholars suggest that, by now, fake news has become "a catch-all for bad information" (Habgood-Coote 2019, 8). This is why scholars have also described it as a "fluid descriptor" (Carlson 2018, 6) and a "floating signifier" (Farkas and Schou 2018, 300), which is used differently in different

contexts. Relating to this, a recent content analysis of the Twitter discourse surrounding "fake news" shows that it is a highly politicized term that is mainly used to discredit statements by the opposition as false (Brummette et al. 2018). Consequently, the term has become so popular that it now is a normal set of words to describe falsity in general, regardless of intentionality and journalistic design.

In sum, the term "fake news" has thus been studied in the context of (1) disinformation and (2) media criticism, but also to simply describe (3) a larger development of increasing insecurity about truth in modern societies. Research on these three meanings seems to suggest that journalistic attention to a "fake news crisis" has at least in part contributed to this development. In the following, we describe why precise knowledge of how journalists might have done so is relevant.

Why Could Using the Term "Fake News" in Journalistic Reporting Be Problematic?

We argue that there are two main reasons why understanding how journalists give meaning to the term "fake news" is relevant for journalism research: First, as discussed before, the term lacks a "stable public meaning" (Habgood-Coote 2019, 2). Thus, when described as a threat to democratic societies in media coverage, it is left to citizens to define what exactly constitutes this threat. Second, using the term in mediated debates may have contributed toward weaponizing the term for critical political actors, who use the fake news label to delegitimize journalism as a democratic institution (e.g., Lakoff 2018).

When a new term enters public discourse, it is not unusual that its use and meaning are debated. For example, the concept of "populism" has long been characterized as ambiguous due to a lack of consensus regarding what exactly is described by the term (e.g., Reinemann et al. 2016). This ambiguity can be found in academic research, where scholars use it differently, but even more so in journalistic coverage. For instance, a content analysis of British media coverage of the terms "populism" and "populist" shows that these terms are used very imprecisely by journalists, who often apply them to label political enemies. The media are thereby describing a variety of unrelated actors as populists (e.g., Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart 2011). This is seen as problematic, as inconsistencies between scientific and vernacular understandings of concepts can impede dialogue between science and society and thereby hamper social science's impact and contribution for citizens (e.g., Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart 2011; Reinemann et al. 2016).

In the same line, fuzzy journalistic usage of the term "fake news" to describe a variety of concepts that are only loosely connected to falsehood and inaccuracy will simply make the term usable in a variety of situations, thereby inflating its salience. This means that fake news might be perceived as a disproportionately important problem by audiences. For example, polls showed that in 2019, US citizens ranked fake news as a bigger threat to their country than climate change, racism, or terrorism (Mitchell et al. 2019). Scientific studies, however, suggest that the actual impact of fake news in terms of the share of citizens exposed to intentionally created pseudojournalistic stories is relatively small, compared to the individuals who visit established news sites (Fletcher et al. 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018; see also Grinberg et al. 2019).

More importantly, however, the term is potentially dangerous for journalism as a democratic institution. Starting with President Trump in the US, the term has been

instrumentalized by politicians around the world to delegitimize critical reporting, turning it into a "frontal attack on traditional core values of journalistic practice" (Farkas and Schou 2018, 308). Therefore, a growing number of public actors call for its abandonment in public discourse (e.g., Badshah 2018; HLEG 2018; Habgood-Coote 2019; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).

This fake news label is dangerous, as elite media criticism has the potential to influence citizens' media perceptions (e.g., Ladd 2012). Importantly, there is initial evidence suggesting that the mere presence of the term in news articles (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) or in elite discourse on Twitter (Van Duyn and Collier 2019) is sufficient to lower media trust for (some) citizens. Therefore, by repeating the term "fake news" constantly, the press might be complicit in turning it into an effective weapon that is used against journalism (Lakoff 2018). Relating to this, Watts and colleagues (1999) suggested that media bias perceptions of many US citizens might have been a consequence of the news media's extensive coverage of conservative elites' media bias claims.

In sum, all of the above suggests the crucial need to understand how journalists use the term "fake news" in their coverage. This seems of particular relevance in times where skepticism appears to be the status quo for many citizens when considering the trustworthiness of news (Carlson 2017).

Observing "Fake News" as a Three-Dimensional Concept in the News

We thus argue that there is a need to understand how journalists use the term in their reporting. More specifically, we consider it relevant to investigate which of the three contexts fake news is mentioned in is most visibly discussed and how this might have changed over time.

When thinking about how journalists cover fake news, we wonder not only how visible the term is in terms of absolute numbers, but also how commonly journalists make a connection between the core understanding of the term as disinformation and other, more watered-down or even unrelated understandings of the term. Recent research on audiences shows that the public's understanding of the term seems to vary from "poor journalism" to propaganda, (native) advertising, and more (Nielsen and Graves 2017). This might also be a result of the press using the term too freely in their reporting (Funke 2018)—but empirical data on this assumption is missing. One exception to this is presented by Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019), who analyzed US-newspaper editorials on fake news from 2016 to 2017. Their results showed that there were hardly any efforts to offer explicit definitions of the concept. In sum, we thus suggest observing the visibility of the term and its definitions over time, starting with the first journalistic discussions of the term during the 2016 US presidential election campaign. Therefore, our first research question reads:

> RQ1: In which of the following contexts do journalists use the term "fake news" most visibly: (a) the genre of disinformation, (b) the weaponized label, (c) the empty buzzword.

Beyond the term itself, we also wonder who the central actors are when the term is used. A small handful of studies have indicated a small range of actors that are commonly held responsible for the creation and spread of fake news or responsible for coming up with solutions for it (Carlson 2018; Farkas and Schou 2018; Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019). Prominently discussed in this context are social media platforms such as Facebook, political

actors such as Donald Trump, and citizens who are unable to sufficiently evaluate information online. Interestingly, when considering counteractions, some news coverage stresses that part of the responsibility also lies with (transparent and objective) journalism (Carlson 2018; Farkas and Schou 2018; see also Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019). Furthermore, Farkas and Schou (2018) showed that a weaponization of the term "fake news" (i.e., use of the label) was predominantly connected to right-wing populist actors (i.e., in particular to Donald Trump and his supporters), who used it to discredit liberal and mainstream media (see also Lischka 2019). However, it sometimes is also applied by other actors as a criticism of right-wing media outlets (e.g., *Breitbart*).

While these studies offered crucial first insights into who the central actors in journalistic discussions of fake news are, they must be complemented with a broader overview of the use of the term over time. What is more, we lack any knowledge on the actors that are facilitating the usage of the term in contexts unrelated to disinformation or media criticism (i.e., the empty concept). Based on the above, we pose the following research question (see also Figure 1):

> RQ2: Who are the central actors in media coverage of fake news relating to (a) the genre of disinformation, (b) the weaponized label, and (c) the empty buzzword?

Method

The Austrian Case

The studies discussed above focused on the United States and leave much unexplained in other contexts where fake news has become an equally salient issue (e.g., Newman et al. 2018). This is why Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019) called for studies on discourses on fake news in non-US media. For example, the central actors might differ here. We do know that in the United States, fake news stories have mostly featured political actors, especially the 2016 presidential candidates (e.g., Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Mourão and Robertson 2019). However, in German-speaking countries, fake news has more often featured

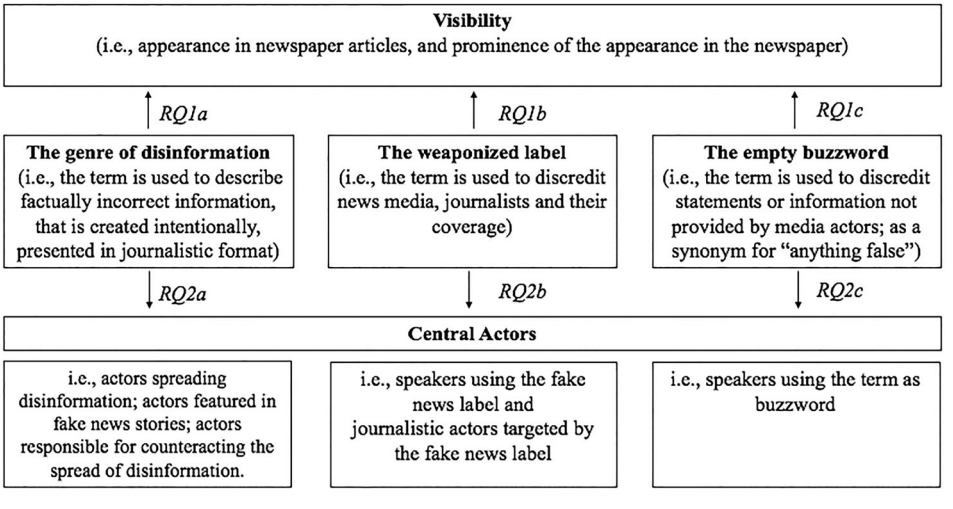

Figure 1. Fake news concepts in news coverage.

immigrants (Humprecht 2019). What is more, our knowledge about central actors in the weaponization of the term is restricted to President Trump, while scholars and anecdotal evidence suggest that the term is used by other political leaders as well (e.g., Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Especially in German-speaking countries, we can witness an increase in right-wing populist media attacks, some referring to the fake news label and related terms (e.g., "lying press").

Therefore, following the call of Tandoc and colleagues, we analyze news coverage on fake news in Austria. Fake news is increasingly discussed as a possible threat to democracy in Austria. For example, around half of Austrian voters feared that fake news would influence the 2017 national election outcome (Wagner et al. 2018). During the election campaign, there was an instance of dirty campaigning (where false-flag Facebook pages spread disinformation about political candidates) that was prominently reported under the fake news umbrella (e.g., Die Presse 2018a).

The use of the fake news label against the news media is also worrying Austrian citizens —even more so (56%) compared to the US public (46%) (Newman et al. 2018, 38–39). These worries might be related to a number of instances where Austrian politicians have used the fake news label to attack critical news coverage. For example, the then leader of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), and former Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, used it to dismiss critical media reports (Die Presse 2018b) and to attack the public broadcaster ORF (Reuters 2018). The FPÖ is in general highly critical of the ORF and is publicly demanding to abolish license fees, which has caused international observers to express their worries about the state of press freedom in Austria (e.g., Newman et al. 2019; RSF 2018b).

Based on the above, we suggest that the Austrian context is a most likely case to find a lively journalistic debate on fake news outside the US context—not only relating to the US case but also to Austrian politics.

Study Sample

To answer the research questions, we analyzed all articles published in eight Austrian daily newspapers[2] that mentioned the term "fake news" over the course of three and a half years, between 1 January 2015 and 1 May 2018 ($N = 2{,}967$). We focused on newspaper coverage, as it plays a crucial role in Austria. The Austrian media system fits the democratic-corporatist model and is characterized by high newspaper circulation (comparable to Germany and Switzerland, for example) (Eberl, Boomgaarden, and Wagner 2017; Hallin and Mancini 2004). Focusing on newspaper coverage enabled us to investigate the usage of the term not only by journalists but also by politicians and other actors. The time period was chosen to cover the genesis of the usage of the term "fake news" as well as its evolution over time. The sample consisted of national daily news outlets that have the widest reach in Austria (Media Analyse 2015–2018; for more information on circulation figures of each outlet, please see online Appendix A). The sample was varied in terms of ideological leaning and media genre, containing newspapers that are perceived to be more left-leaning (e.g., *Der Standard*) and more right-leaning (e.g., *Die Presse*), as well as broadsheets (*Der Standard*, *Die Presse*, *Salzburger Nachrichten*), tabloid (*Kronen Zeitung*, *Österreich*, *Heute*), and mid-range newspapers (*Kurier*, *Kleine Zeitung*).

Coding Procedure and Variables

For the manual content analysis, three coders (i.e., two authors and a graduate student) coded the content of each newspaper article that used the term "fake news," using the online content analysis tool AmCAT. For each article coders read the title, the first paragraph, and all other paragraphs in which the term appeared. Coder training featured an initial discussion of the codebook and multiple rounds of coding, discussing and evaluating the codings until all disagreements were resolved and acceptable intercoder reliability was achieved.[3]

Fake News Concepts

The first set of variables were dichotomously coded and considered if the article used "fake news" in the context of the genre of disinformation, relating to fake news label attacks, or used it as an empty buzzword.

Visibility

To answer the research question about the visibility of the term "fake news" (RQ1), we automatically analyzed how often the term appeared in articles, and whether it was used in the title or the text body. All other variables were coded manually.

Definitions

To understand how visible academic definitions of fake news were in the context of disinformation (RQ1), we coded whether the article provided definitional information when using the term (in articles relating to the fake news genre). We based our definitional categories on characteristics derived from previous studies that have defined fake news (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Lazer et al. 2018; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). Specifically, we distinguished three categories: (a) false information (i.e., the article mentioned that fake news consists of wrongful information), (b) intentionality (i.e., the article mentioned that fake news is created and/or spread deliberately), and (c) pseudojournalistic design (i.e., fake news was described as something that looks like news). All categories were coded as a dichotomous variable, distinguishing whether the characteristic was mentioned or not.

Actors

For fake news as a genre of disinformation, we distinguished three categories of central actors: actors that were reported (a) to spread disinformation, (b) to be featured in fake news stories, or (c) to be responsible for counteracting the spread of disinformation. For the fake news label we distinguished (a) actors that were reported to be using the fake news label and (b) journalistic actors against whom the fake news label was used. Actors in the empty concept were all actors that used the term to simply state that something was incorrect, or as a synonym for lies or falsehood. All actors were coded as an open text field, which was harmonized after coding was finalized.[4] We mostly distinguished between political actors (e.g., from Austria, the United States, and Russia) and unpolitical and private actors. However, we also characterized one major group of political actors as populist by relying on previous studies that categorized parties and politicians as populist (e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2019; Wettstein et al. 2019). Accordingly, we characterized the following actors that appeared in our data set as populist: Donald Trump and his

government, the Austrian party FPÖ and its splinter party the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), the Austrian government between the People's Party (ÖVP) and the FPÖ, the German Alternative for Germany (AfD), the French Front National, the Italian Five Star Movement and Forza Italia, the Hungarian party Fidesz, and all these parties' members.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability scores were calculated based on a sample of 200 articles in total (i.e., approximately 7% of the sample). Three separate reliability codings were conducted: one before, one during, and one after the coding of the data. Krippendorff's α ranged from 0.70 to 0.84, except for one variable (i.e., actors reported to spread fake news), where Krippendorff's α was 0.52. However, this variable had a very skewed distribution, in which case the Krippendorff's alpha might be too conservative (e.g., Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). Therefore, we additionally calculated Scott's Pi as well as Brennan and Prediger's kappa, measures that are suggested to be more robust for assessing agreement of variables that are not well distributed (Quarfoot and Levine 2016). These showed acceptable scores for all variables (Scott's Pi ranged from 0.70 to 0.83; Brennan and Prediger's κ ranged from 0.78 to 0.94; percentage agreement ranged from 0.86 to 0.94). All coefficients are reported in online Appendix C.

Results

Visibility

Of all 2,967 articles, 57% (1,678) considered fake news as a genre of disinformation, 22% (653) referred to the weaponized fake news label, and about 43% (713) used the empty buzzword.[5,6] To understand which of the three concepts of fake news was most visible in news coverage (RQ1), we first examined how many news articles on each concept were produced over time. Second, we investigated how often the term was used in the whole article as well as whether it was used in the title or not in order to understand how central the concept was in the article.

Before October 2016, there were no articles by Austrian newspapers on fake news. This finding is in line with authors who have suggested that the 2016 US presidential election was the origin of the fake news debate (e.g., Farkas and Schou 2018; McNair 2017). As seen in Figure 2, news coverage on fake news started out focusing on disinformation. Articles on attacks on journalism (and false information in general) emerged a few months later, between December 2016 and January 2017. This finding is in line with a content analysis of Donald Trump's Twitter discourse, which showed that he started weaponizing the fake news term after he was elected in December 2016 (Meeks 2019). While the coverage of fake news as a genre of disinformation slightly decreased over time, over the whole time span there was steadily more journalistic discussion of this original concept, compared to the fake news label and the empty buzzword.

Next we looked at how often the term was used in the whole article as well as in the title to understand how central the concept was in the article. About 15% of all articles used the term "fake news" in their title, most often referring to the fake news genre (Table 1). Furthermore, most articles referred only once to the term. However, articles on the genre used the term comparatively more often.

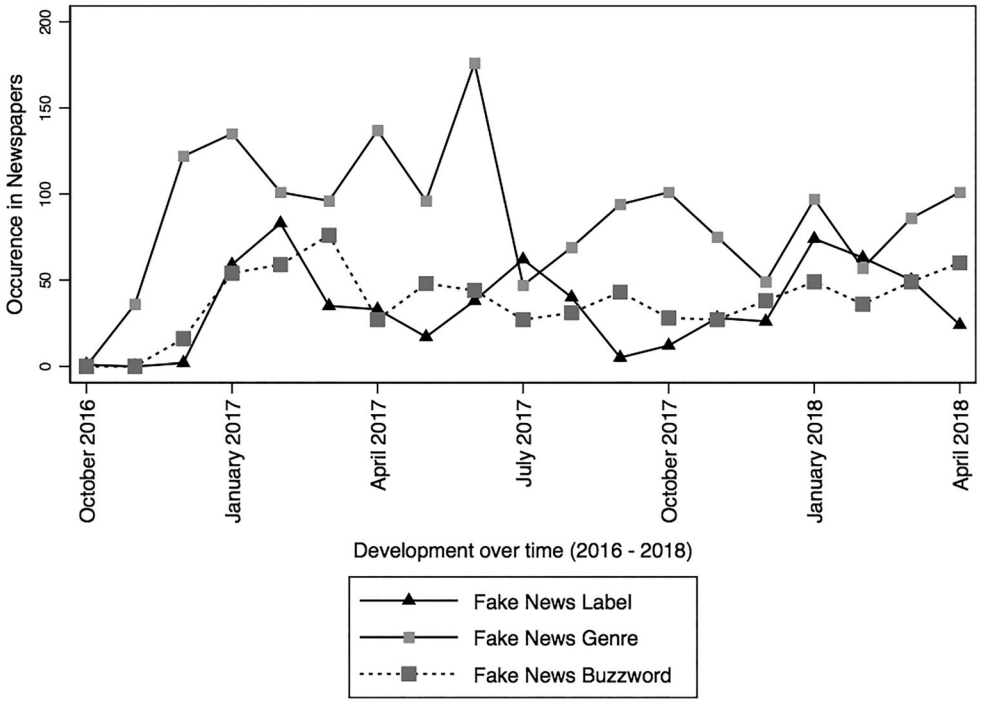

Figure 2. Articles on the three fake news concepts over time.

Relating to the original concept, we further investigated whether journalists defined the fake news term when they used it and which of the scholarly characteristics was most visible. Of all articles that used fake news in the context of disinformation, about 44% (732 articles) provided definitional information for it. Of these, most articles mentioned that fake news consists of *false information* (44.2%). Journalists used the characteristics *journalistic design* (28.5%) and *intentionality* (27.4%) almost equally often when characterizing fake news.

In sum, while news coverage connected to the weaponized label and the empty buzzword increased over time, the term still was most visible in the news on the original context of disinformation, where journalists mostly defined it as false information.

Central Actors

Turning to central actors in the journalistic coverage of fake news, we distinguished three actor categories for the fake news genre of disinformation. Articles could feature actors

Table 1. Number of "fake news" mentions in title and text body.

	Genre	Label	Buzzword
Mention in title	19.4% (326)	10.3% (67)	11.7% (81)
1 mention in text	58.2% (976)	66.3% (433)	76.6% (546)
2–4 mentions in text	33.2% (558)	28.2% (184)	21.6% (154)
5 or more mentions in text	8.6% (144)	5.5% (36)	1.8% (13)
All	100% (1.678)	100% (653)	100% (713)

that were said to be (a) spreading fake news, (b) featured in fake news, or (c) responsible for counteracting fake news.

In 15.6% of the articles on the fake news genre, actors who were spreading fake news were mentioned. Figure 3 visualizes all mentioned actors over time. We can see that Russian actors (i.e., mostly Vladimir Putin and his government) were most prominently mentioned (35.6%). In the beginning private actors were also often reported (14.9%). Here, articles most often related to young Macedonian citizens who were found to be spreading pro-Trump fake news for financial reasons (e.g., Silverman and Alexander 2016). Interestingly, compared to US actors (11%), Austrian actors (21.5%) were reported not only more often but also earlier, at the beginning of journalistic coverage—suggesting that the topic of disinformation was relevant early on in the Austrian context. Moreover, considering Austrian actors, we can see a peak in October 2017, where the legislative elections took place—highlighting that fake news as disinformation appeared to be a particularly salient topic in election contexts. Political actors from other countries (e.g., France, Hungary, the UK, Italy, and Germany) and nonpolitical actors (e.g., NGOs, websites, academics) were reported less often (in 10% and 7% of the cases, respectively).

Turning to actors that were reported to be featured in fake news stories (in 16.4% of news articles on the genre context), we can see that political actors from the United States (22.6%) dominated news coverage in the beginning. However, later on, political actors from other countries (28.3%—mainly actors from France, Hungary, Russia, the UK, and Germany), as well as nonpolitical actors (36.7%—including refugees and immigrants,

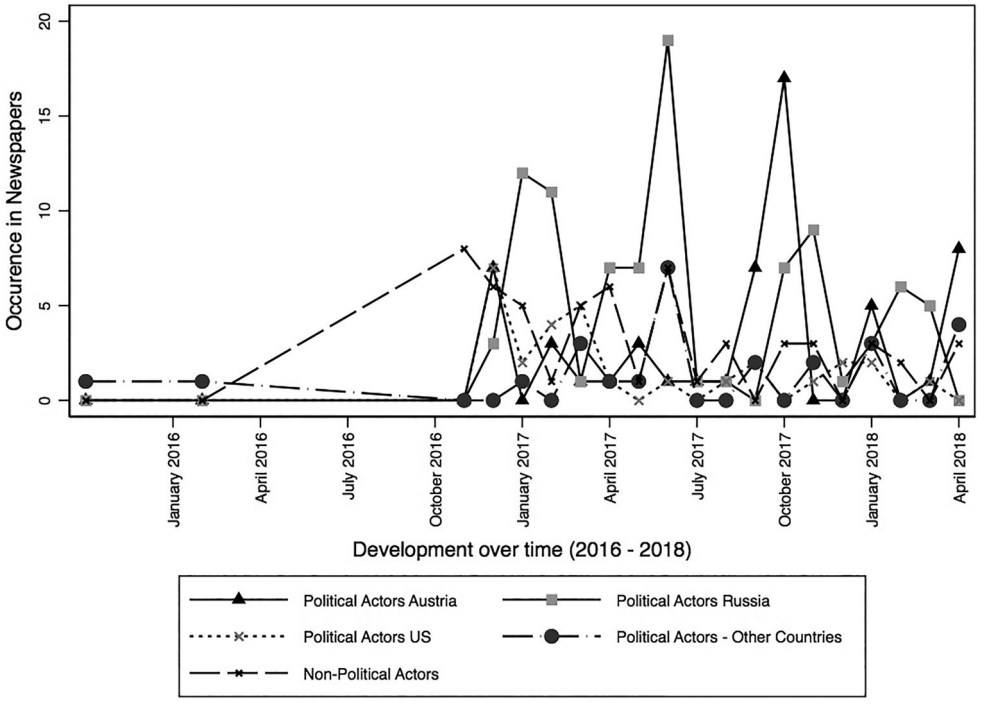

Figure 3. Actors spreading fake news.

NGOs, prominent actors from culture and sports), were discussed much more. Political actors from Austria (12.4%) were least mentioned in this context (Figure 4).

In sum, fears of interference by Russia and other fake news creators in the 2016 election was highly discussed in Austrian news coverage. However, the fake news (genre) discussion very quickly spread to other political and election contexts.

In 35% of the articles on the fake news genre context, counteracting actors were discussed. Similarly to the qualitative studies mentioned above (Carlson 2018; Farkas and Schou 2018; Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019), our results showed that when it came to counteracting fake news, responsible actors were mostly from politics (25%), social media (26.5%), and journalism (25.1%). To a certain degree, citizens' levels of media literacy (12.9%) and efforts of fact-checking organizations (10.5%) were also part of discussions on counteracting fake news' effects.

Central actors in the weaponized context were (a) actors said to be using the fake news label against (b) journalistic actors. As seen in Figure 5, political actors were again prevalent, especially actors from the United States (59.6%). Here, most articles related to Donald Trump (57.1%), who was the first and most reported actor using the label during the analyzed period. Later on, articles on Austrian politicians increased (23.4%). Our results further showed that journalistic actors also sometimes used the fake news label to discredit other journalistic actors (8.3%). Nonpolitical actors and political actors from other countries (e.g., France and Russia) received less coverage (6.3% and 2.5%, respectively). Figure 6 considers populist political actors specifically, which constituted 76% of all actors using the fake news term as a label. It shows that the trend for the United States almost perfectly overlaps

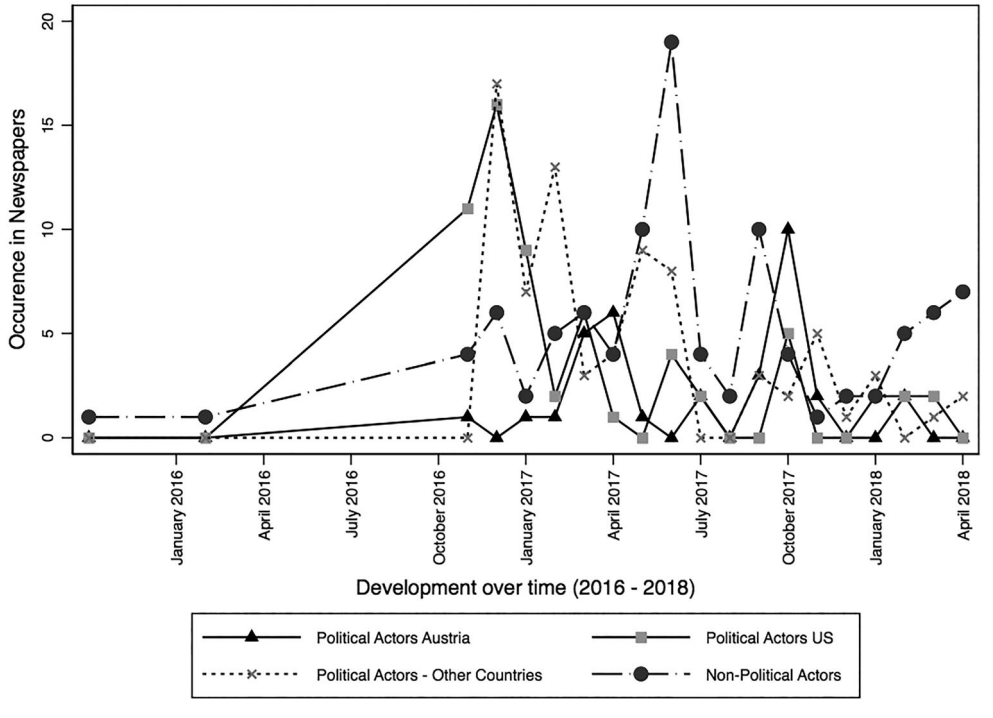

Figure 4. Actors featured in fake news stories.

with the trend in Figure 5. This indicates that in the US, only populist political actors (mainly Trump) applied the term this way. The trend line for Austria shows a completely different picture: the spikes in the spring and summer of 2017 for Austrian political actors, as shown in Figure 5, were not caused by populist political actors. This might imply that using the fake news label in the US context was exclusively part of a populist strategy, and especially connected to Donald Trump, who coined the phrase. However, in Austria, newspapers also paid attention to non-populist actors using the fake news label. Furthermore, our results seem to suggest that in both the US and the Austrian case, politicians started using the fake news label once they were elected.[7] Apparently, once populist politicians are in power, they express their anti-media sentiments more publicly.

Considering actors that were discredited by the fake news label (Figure 7), we saw that most articles did not report on specific outlets, but that the media in general was being attacked (44.1%). Furthermore, media outlets from the United States were again often reported (30%), showing that Trump's accusations received much attention in Austrian news reporting. In comparison, Austrian news outlets were reported in 21.5% of the cases (*ORF*: 14.3%, *Der Falter:* 4.7%, and other newspapers: 2.5%).

More in detail, we examined the most frequently occurring actor combinations for the fake news label. Figure 8 shows that Trump first used the term in December 2016 to attack the media in general and established media actors in the United States. The second two highest spikes relate to reports on Donald Trump discrediting news reports about his relation to Russia in summer 2017 (Die Presse 2017a) and a number of articles that

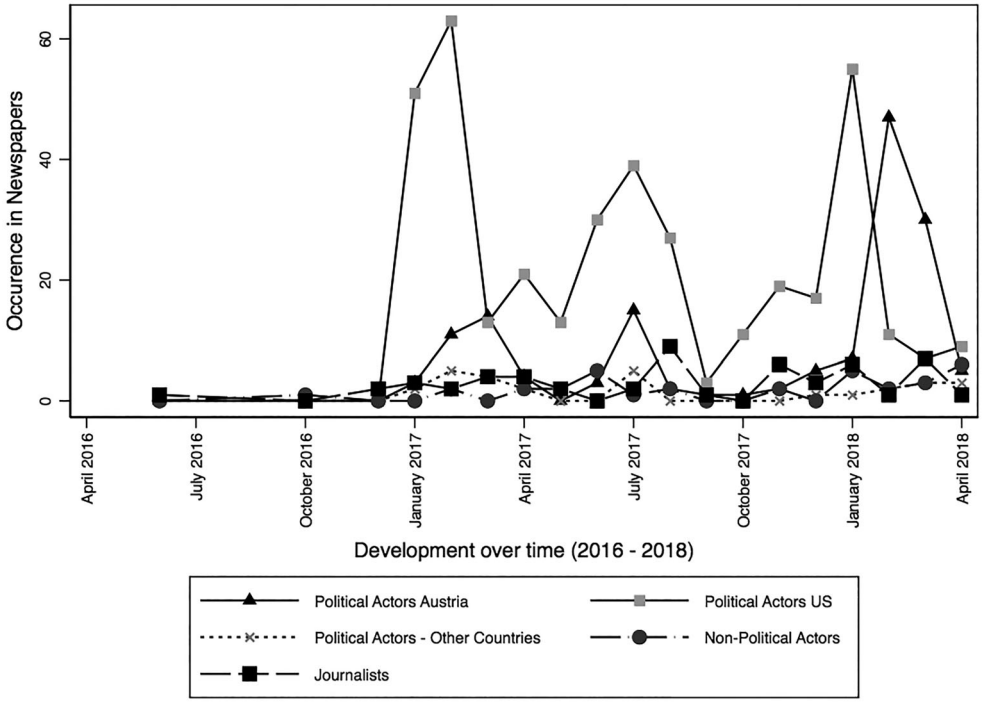

Figure 5. Actors using the fake news label.

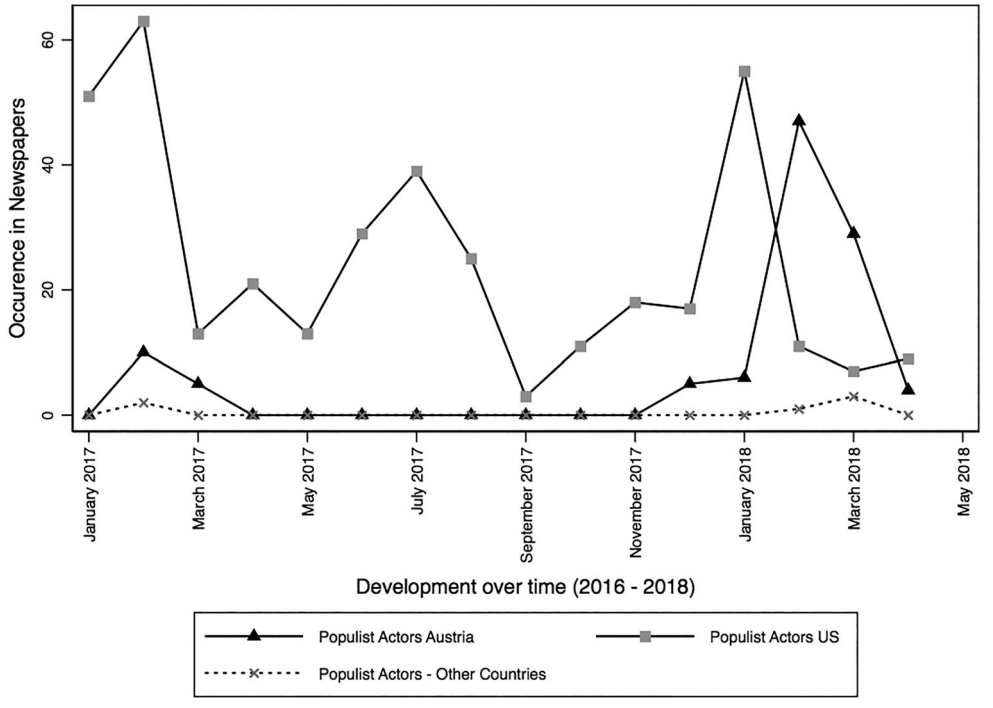

Figure 6. Populist actors using the fake news label.

reported on his announcement of the "winners" of the "fake news awards" in January 2018 (Kirby and Nelson 2018).

From 2017 onwards, there was an increase in the use of the term by Austrian political actors. The first reported Austrian actor was Bernhard Ebner, of the ÖVP lower Austria, who attacked the magazine *Der Falter* in the spring of 2017 (e.g., Brandl 2017). Articles reported on this instance again in the summer of 2017, when the chief editor of *Der Falter,* Florian Klenk, filed a lawsuit against Ebner and his party (e.g., Die Presse 2017b). In 2018, the FPÖ was reported to frequently use the label against the *ORF*. Here, articles reported on a meme Heinz-Christian Strache (then leader of the FPÖ) posted on Facebook attacking the *ORF*, accusing the public broadcaster of spreading fake news, lies, and propaganda (DerStandard.at 2018).

Interestingly, later on, journalistic actors also used the term to describe other journalistic actors. This indicates that the use of the fake news label was established by political actors but became somewhat socially acceptable over time, to be used by nonpolitical and media actors.

Finally, of all actors using the term as an empty buzzword (in 713 articles), we found that journalists were the biggest group using fake news to simply describe something as false (46.1%), with the majority being those journalists who wrote the analyzed articles (41.2%). Furthermore, nonpolitical actors (e.g., from culture and sports; 20.6%), political actors from the United States (13.7%) and Austria (13.6%), and political actors from other countries (6%) were reported to use the term to discredit a piece of information as false. The fact that journalistic actors used the empty buzzword

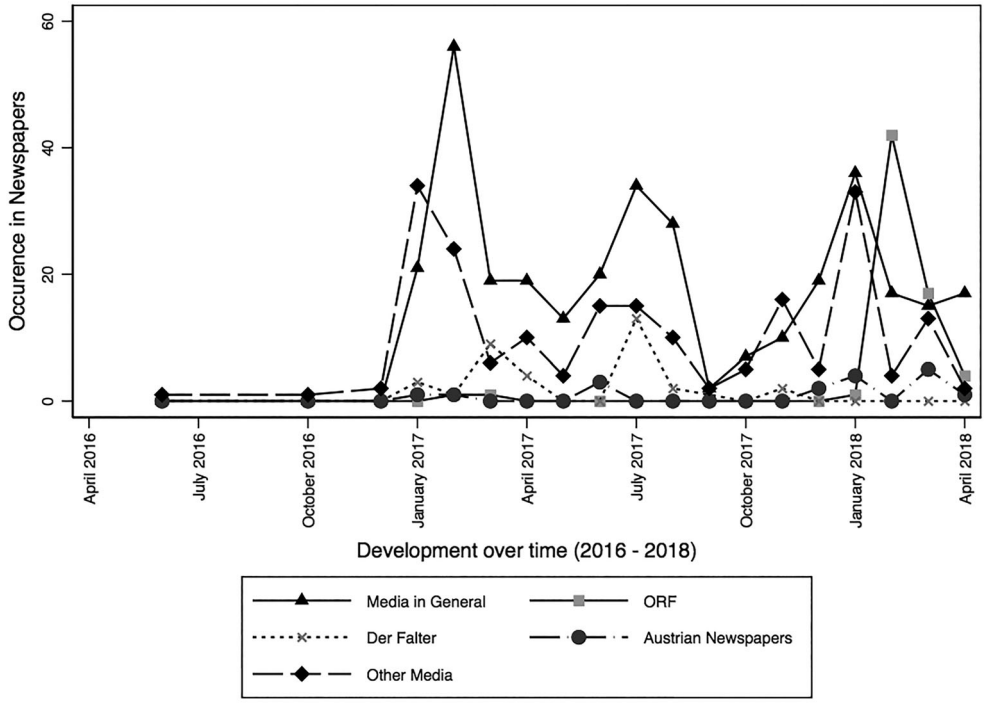

Figure 7. Actors being discredited with the fake news label.

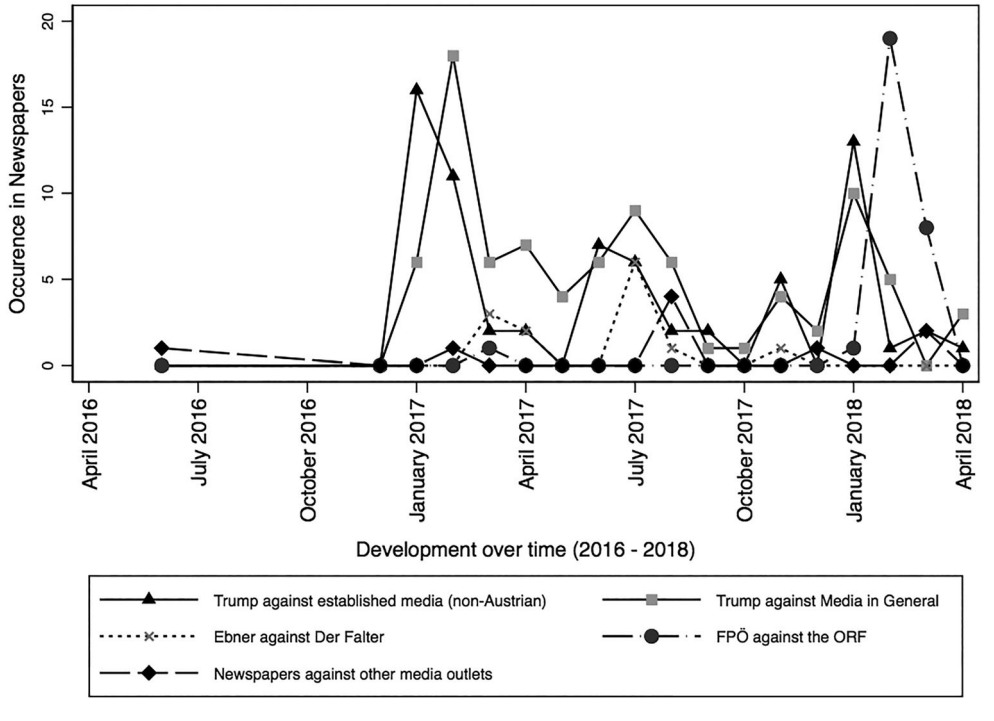

Figure 8. Most reported actor combinations for the fake news label.

most often is consonant with the finding that "false information" is the most visible definitional characteristic of fake news. For the analyzed newspapers, fake news was mostly an issue of falsehood, and they have adopted the term to express that something is incorrect.

Conclusion

Since 2016, fake news appears to have become one of the most worrisome issues for citizens (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2019). At the same time, members of academia (e.g., HLEG 2018), journalism (e.g., Badshah 2018), and politics (Murphy 2018) have criticized the use of the term widely, and the term itself has become a weapon that is used against the news media as democratic institutions. Nevertheless, since 2016, news coverage on fake news has exploded in the United States (McNair 2017). We showed that this excessive interest in fake news can also be observed in Austrian media discourses. Here, the term was used in three different contexts. It was applied to describe forms of disinformation (i.e., the fake news genre). These fabricated stories first gained attention during the 2016 US presidential election but became a much-discussed issue in Austria as well. Second, the term has been instrumentalized by a number of political actors, who have used it as a label to critically attack the news media (i.e., the fake news label). Third, we showed that it has also been applied more generally to articulate a disagreement with a statement or information provided by a non-media actor—or simply used as a synonym for "falsehood" or "lie." Consequently, while fake news started out as a problem of an increase in disinformation, it has become a discussion of attacks on the news media and has been normalized as a catchy buzzword to express doubts about information in general.

In sum, our analysis shows that in the studied time period the discourse surrounding fake news as a genre was most prevalent—suggesting that fake news was still first and foremost a discussion about disinformation. However, other journalistic discourses on fake news have developed over time. One discussion centers around the fake news label, where journalists have mostly reported on populist political actors using the term against established media and the media in general. However, in some instances, they used the label themselves against other media outlets. Furthermore, journalists have characterized fake news predominantly as false information, and they have enlarged the discussion around this concept by using it as a catchy buzzword for anything that is inaccurate. In all three contexts, actors from the United States played a central role. However, actors from Austria and other countries also received notable coverage in the news about fake news. By using the term "fake news" frequently in different contexts, journalists contributed to its salience as well as ambiguity and, importantly, assisted in its normalization.

There are a number of caveats in our study. First of all, we present the results of a broad and descriptive analysis of media content. While this limits our conclusions on some dimensions, we do answer a call by a number of scholars for more descriptive studies on developments over time in communication research, which seems particularly important in the context of rather new phenomena such as fake news. We hope our baseline findings inspire future research to further disentangle the conditions under which a fake news debate has and will develop in the news media. For example, such work

might study the use of specific news frames or discussion patterns in relation to "fake news", and thus identify more elaborate evaluations of the term and its consequences. Future researchers could also zoom in on only one of the dimensions in our study; for example, they could study only coverage of the fake news label and how journalists evaluate such attacks. While one study has already provided some insights on how *The New York Times* reacts to such attacks on its own coverage (Lischka 2019), it is also relevant to investigate how the media evaluate instances where the fake news label is applied against other outlets or—more broadly—to the media as a democratic institution. What is more, we see our results as a foundation for more comparative and longitudinal content analysis, which will show when a journalistic debate such as this one about fake news peaks and decreases (e.g., Vasterman 2005). This kind of research can show how the journalistic coverage of the term "fake news" evolves in the coming years to see whether the somewhat excessive use of the term was a short-lived novelty or whether the term and all its concepts are here to stay.

Furthermore, we are at this point only able to speculate on the effects this analyzed media coverage has on citizens. In the most general sense, future studies must focus on whether the prominence of the term alone in public debates matters. For instance, we have argued that the normalization of the term is dangerous, as it might strengthen the effectiveness of the fake news label. Available research on repetitive framing (e.g., Lecheler and de Vreese 2013) and repetition in persuasion (e.g., Dechêne et al. 2010) has showed that repeated exposure increases message effects. However, too much repetition of a message may cause reactance in citizens (Koch and Zerback 2013). Constant repetition of the fake news label could, therefore, also backfire and weaken the perceived credibility of politicians who repeatedly use the term, compared to citizens' trust in the news media that are being attacked. A next step may be more specific studies on the conditions under which detrimental effects of exposure to the term could occur. For instance, effects of the fake news label are likely related to partisan ideology (e.g., Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) and may differ widely between countries and media systems.

Nonetheless, the potential risk that the fake news label might be an effective instrument in influencing media perceptions of (at least some) citizens should be reason enough to rethink the use of the term—especially considering that it has no intrinsic meaning independent of the context in which it is used. In sum, our results thus suggest that journalists' usage of the term "fake news" contributes to its continuing salience and might even strengthen its trivialization. While a complete abandonment of the term in the news might be unrealistic, we urge journalists to use the term less often and more consciously. This is in line with other scholars, who have demanded a more conscious usage of the term in science as well as in journalism and who have proposed a return to the use of more meaningful notions, such as "disinformation" or simply "false news" (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; HLEG 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020).

Furthermore, as "even findings that are well-established by social scientists" are often not known to the journalistic community (e.g., Lazer et al. 2017, 9), we see a great need to strengthen the dialogue between (social) science and journalism. Specifically, journalists need to be informed that a trivialization of the term might backfire and damage their work's credibility.

Notes

1. However, it is noteworthy that while fake news is *created* intentionally, its dissemination can be unintentional (see also Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019, 100).
2. We included articles of the print versions of all eight newspapers, and additionally all articles by the online versions (of four news outlets).
3. A translated version of the codebook (from German to English) can be found in online Appendix B.
4. Except for actors responsible for counteracting, here we coded dichotomously if the following actor categories were mentioned in the context of counteracting measures: political actors, social media companies, journalistic actors, fact-checking agencies, and citizens (in the context of media literacy).
5. These percentages exceed 100%, as some articles included several fake news types, and categories were thus not mutually exclusive.
6. We did not have access to the online versions of four out of eight of the analyzed newspapers. Specifically, of the three tabloid newspapers we could analyze only the print version, which is why articles by broadsheets are overrepresented in our sample. To ensure that our results are not strongly influenced by the uneven distribution of outlets, we conducted the analysis exclusively with print articles as well. However, the results do not differ substantially from those presented here (see online Appendix D).
7. The inauguration of Donald Trump was in January 2017; the inauguration of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition was in January 2018.

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Delegitimizing the media?

Analyzing politicians' media criticism on social media

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A growing literature on the impact of "fake news" accusations on legacy news outlets suggests that the use of this term is part of a much larger trend of increased and delegitimizing media criticism by political actors. However, so far, there is very little empirical evidence on how prevailing politicians' delegitimizing media criticism really is and under which conditions it occurs. To fill these gaps, we present results of a content analysis of media-related Facebook postings by Austrian and German politicians in 2017 ($N = 2{,}921$). The results suggest that media criticism, in general, is actually rare and that about half of it can be described as delegitimizing (i.e., characterized by incivility or absence of argumentation). Most often, media criticism is used by populist politicians, who accuse "the media" in general of bias and falsehoods.

Keywords: media criticism, delegitimization, social media, content analysis, populist communication, fake news

1. Introduction

Having trusted news media is fundamental for political decision-making and, therefore crucial for the well-being of democracies (e.g., Tsfati and Cohen 2005). However, journalism is increasingly met with distrust (e.g., Newman et al. 2019) and even outright hostility, with more and more politicians openly attacking news media (Reporters without Borders 2018). While media criticism by politicians is not new, through social media – where politicians can communicate their media criticism directly to their audiences – it has reached an unparalleled presence (Carlson 2017).

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Media criticism has an essential democratic function, and politicians have every right to criticize inadequate media coverage. However, some use media criticism as a strategy to delegitimize journalism as the fourth estate in democratic societies as well as to impact the audience's media perceptions. One example that has received much attention is the term "fake news", which is now often used by politicians to delegitimize critical news media (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Farhall et al. 2019; Lischka 2019; Solis and Sagarzazu 2020). These accusations and anti-media sentiments, in general, are often connected to the populist ideology which deems the media as part of the evil elite (Hameleers 2020a). However, while a populist worldview likely plays a key role in increasing verbal attacks on journalism, non-populist politicians also make use of (harsh) media criticisms (Solis and Solaris 2020).

While worries about this delegitimization of journalism are increasing (e.g., Van Dalen 2019), we lack empirical evidence of how prevalent (delegitimizing) media criticism by politicians actually is, as well as under which circumstances it is expressed. We aim to fill these gaps through a content analysis of media-related Facebook postings by Austrian and German parties and leading party candidates in 2017. We go beyond the much-debated term "fake news" by analyzing all instances of both legitimate as well as delegitimizing media criticism posted by political actors. This allows for a more nuanced picture of politicians' references to news media and journalists on social media and the suggested prevalence of negative sentiments.

2. Media criticism in a digital age: From "good" to "bad"?

Media criticism is part of a metajournalistic discourse, which comprises all public expressions about journalism, its definition, boundaries, and legitimacy. As such, media criticism "either legitimizes or delegitimizes journalistic practice" (Cheruiyot 2018, 1009; see also Carlson 2016; 2017). Thereby, media criticism has a crucial democratic role: it serves as a mechanism of journalistic accountability and evaluates how the press fulfills its democratic functions. It does so by identifying specific cases that violate journalistic norms and practices and characterizing these as deviation from what constitutes "healthy" journalism (Carlson 2009, 261). Thereby, media criticism indirectly "controls" the media without direct control in the form of regulation or censorship (Wyatt 2019, 1; see also Carey 1974; Carlson 2017; Cheruiyot 2018; 2019; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). The aim of media criticism is then to evaluate journalistic performance and the quality of its outcome to bring about positive change in journalism (Wyatt 2007). Media criticism thus protects the legitimacy of journalism as a democratic institution. Therefore, all

actors are invited to participate in critical discourses about media coverage and practice. In the same vein, journalistic actors are expected to listen and respond to criticism (Cheruiyot 2018).

However, recent years have seen a surge of public concern about media criticism in several (western) democracies. This research suggests that media criticism today has become overly prevalent and has reached a toxic level (Cheruiyot 2019). Also, professional journalism organizations increasingly worry about growth in uncivil attacks and threats towards journalists in countries previously rated as having a free press (Reporters without Borders 2018). In research, this increase of media criticism and hostility towards journalists is most often connected to the emergence of social media (Carlson 2016; 2017; Cheruiyot 2019; Wyatt 2019). News consumption increasingly takes place on social media (Newman et al. 2019), where shared news stories are often accompanied by criticism (Wyatt 2019). These are often "short, direct attacks rather than sustained argument" (Carlson 2016, 920). The use of the term "fake news" against news media is a prime example of the current criticism on social media (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Farhall et al. 2019). Furthermore, social media allow politicians to directly communicate with the public and act as a platform for expressing criticism and antipathy that would not pass journalistic gatekeeping (Engesser et al. 2016).

In this context, it is argued that some politicians use media criticism *strategically*. That is, their media criticism does not address journalists and media actors to evaluate and improve journalistic quality but is aimed at the public to influence citizens' media perceptions (e.g., Farhall et al. 2019; Solis and Sagarzazu 2020). Studies suggest that this strategy can be effective. For example, exposure to Donald Trumps' fake news accusations decreases media trust for Trump-supporters (Guess et al. 2017). This way, media criticism can be an influential tool that requires almost no resources and does not directly interfere with press freedom (Solis and Sagarzazu 2020).

3. Characteristics of delegitimizing media criticism

Simply put, there is "good" media criticism that fulfills important democratic functions, and there is "bad" media criticism that is used to delegitimize journalism. Similarly, the literature on political conflicts stresses that conflict is not bad per se but has an important democratic value. However, when combined with certain characteristics, it can have negative consequences (Otto et al. 2020). So, the question is, which characteristics make media criticism delegitimizing? To answer this question, scholars have been guided by the framework of deliberative democracy (e.g., Cheruiyot 2019; Wyatt 2007). Deliberation emphasizes free debate between

citizens, which enables them to participate in collective decision-making. This is particularly relevant in "today's digital age (…) as the number of voices has multiplied" (Masullo Chen and Lu 2017, 109). Deliberation as a type of communication is characterized by *reasoning* and *civility* (e.g., Friess and Eilders 2015; Prochazka et al. 2018). Accordingly, scholars have identified media criticism as ongoing discourse between the media and their audience, which should be characterized by civil language and substantiated with reasoned arguments (Carey 1974; Cheruiyot 2019; Fawzi 2020; Wyatt 2007; 2019). Based on this, the *absence of reasoning* and the *presence of incivility* can be perceived as characteristics of delegitimizing media criticism.[1]

3.1 Absence of reasoning

Reasoning is one of the most important characteristics of deliberation, and, constructive and rational arguments are vital for moving the conversation forward and reaching consensus (e.g., Friess and Eilders 2015). Media criticism as a discourse about journalistic quality is also dependent on reasoned argumentation (Cheruiyot 2018; Fawzi 2020). Ideally, criticizing actors should strive to encourage dialogue and improve the performance of the press (Wyatt 2019). To do so, they need to explain why a journalistic practice or product is disapproved. Criticizing actors do not have to present a correction or solution. However, the criticized actor (i.e., the media outlet or journalist) has to be able to understand what exactly is criticized and for what reasons. That is, which expectations of journalism have not been met. Only then, journalistic actors are able (and *willing*; see Cheruiyot 2018) to understand and react to the critique, which is necessary to enable improvement.

3.2 Presence of incivility

Civility as a characteristic of deliberate discourses points to the necessity of "mutual recognition of the participants" (Friess and Eilders 2015,330), which ensures that opposing views are not silenced but respected (Jamieson et al. 2017).

1. Some scholars define emotionality as part of incivility (Sobieraj and Berry 2011), and emotionality is seen as contrary to rational reason in early deliberation literature (see Bickford 2011). In line with this, the earliest theorists on media criticism have suggested that media criticism should be expressed in an unemotional language (Carey 1974). However, more recently, emotionality is increasingly recognized as an important part of political communication (Bickford 2011), and deliberation is criticized for its "rationalist bias" which neglects emotionality as a democratically important form of communication (Dahlgren 2005,157). Therefore, we do not include emotionality in our conceptualization of delegitimizing media criticism.

Its counterpart, *incivility*, is understood as an "unnecessarily disrespectful tone" which does not "add anything of substance to the discussion" (Coe et al. 2014, 660). These hyperbolic expressions of disrespect might inhibit actors from communicating their own opinions as well as listening to others. Thereby, incivility is impeding a constructive debate (Prochazka et al. 2018). Importantly, in the context of media criticism, it has been shown that uncivil language in media criticisms causes journalists not to respond to complaints (Cheruiyot 2018).

In sum, media criticism is delegitimizing when it is characterized by at least one of the above-discussed features, *absence of reasoning*, or *presence of incivility*. Having clarified what entails delegitimizing media criticism, we wonder how prevalent it actually is in politicians' social media communication. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: *To what extent is media criticism in politicians' social media communication delegitimizing?*

4. The importance of the "fake news" label

Scholars are increasingly interested in the weaponization of the phrase fake news by politicians as a label to express media criticism (e.g., Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Farhall et al. 2019). In general, accusations of factual incorrectness are pervasive (e.g., Hameleers 2020a). These accusations can be connected to what has been termed "post-truth" communication, or "relativism towards facts" – referring to an observed trend in political communication where facts are seen as debatable and are "often downgraded to mere opinion" (Van Aelst et al. 2017, 14). As a consequence, dismissing information that does not align with one's worldview as false has become a popular strategy, which is especially used against news media as providers of such information. Importantly, political actors increasingly claim not only that media content is incorrect but *intentionally* incorrect. That is, they accuse news media of spreading *disinformation* compared to *misinformation,* the latter being false information that is spread unintentionally. Blaming the media for spreading fake news counts as a disinformation accusation (Hameleers 2020a). We understand this usage of the term fake news as a label to delegitimize news media, as the prime example of delegitimizing media criticism as it fulfills both of the above-suggested characteristics (see also Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Politicians often use it to delegitimize news media without explaining why a medium or its coverage is "fake" (i.e., *absence of reasoning*). Furthermore, some definitions of incivility include lying accusations (e.g., Coe et al. 2014). Apart from that, stating that news coverage is not "false" but "fake" is indeed *unnecessarily*

rude. Labeling something as "fake" negates its function and indicates that its only purpose is to deceive (Lakoff 2017). Thus, we characterize the fake news label as inherently *uncivil*.

Recent discussions give the impression that these fake news attacks are currently the most prevalent theme in politicians' media criticism – however, empirical evidence to support this claim is lacking. Thus, we pose a research question on the prevalence of the fake news label in comparison to other possible issues that politicians might criticize. So far, *partisan media bias accusations* (i.e., unfair coverage of politicians, parties, and ideologies) are the most researched context of politicians' media criticism (e.g., Eberl et al. 2017; Ladd 2012). However, in recent years, also *non-partisan bias accusations* emerged (i.e., unfair coverage of topics and non-partisan actors). For example, in Germany, mainstream media have been criticized for too positive coverage of refugees (Maurer et al. 2019). Furthermore, there are discussions about a possible decline in *journalistic quality*. This discussion runs under keywords such as tabloidization, emotionalization, scandalization, game-framed news or softening of the news (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

RQ2: *How prevalent are fake news accusations in politicians' delegitimizing media criticism?*

5. Determinants of delegitimizing media criticism

Next, we highlight factors that likely determine whether delegitimizing media criticism occurs. More specifically, we discuss which political actors may *use* delegitimizing media criticism, and how and *when* journalistic actors *may be addressed* through delegitimizing media criticism.

5.1 Political actors: Populist politicians and parties

Populism is often described as a communication style or thin ideology, which emphasizes an opposition of the elite and a homogenous people (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2004). In its anti-pluralistic worldview, news media are seen as part of the elite (together with other established institutions, such as politics and science), communicating on behalf of these 'corrupt' establishment institutions and neglecting the interests of the 'good' people. In a populist understanding, telling the truth is, therefore, to expose the lies of the establishment (Waisbord 2018). Accusations of "fake news" and disinformation as well as general anti-establishment media discourses are therefore often understood as fixed characteristics of populist rhetoric (Hameleers 2020a; 2020b; Fawzi 2020). Indeed,

content analyses repeatedly find media criticism and hostility towards journalists as regular features of populist communication (Aalberg et al. 2016; Engesser et al. 2016). Moreover, recent audience surveys demonstrate a relationship between populist views and negative attitudes towards the media (Fawzi 2019; Schulz et al. 2018).[2]

Based on the above, we thus expect that *delegitimizing media criticism is predominantly expressed by populist politicians (H1).*

5.2 Journalistic actors: Generalization of addressee

Media criticism can be expressed at an individual level (i.e., towards journalists), an outlet level, or an institutional level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that much criticism that is characterized by the delegitimizing features is expressed at an institutional level. That is, public expressions of criticism are often generalized against "the media" (Meeks 2020). Similarly, the fake news label is frequently used by politicians against the media in general (Egelhofer et al. 2020). Thereby, politicians are targeting journalism as a democratic institution and are "challeng[ing] the media's claim to legitimacy" (Van Dalen 2019, 13).

Accordingly, we expect that *delegitimizing media criticism is mostly addressed towards the media in general (H2).*

5.3 Time period: Election campaigns

Politicians' rhetoric likely varies between times of routine politics and election campaigns (Solis and Sagarzazu 2020), which might also affect their usage of delegitimizing media criticism. It seems likely, for example, that politicians might refrain from harsh media attacks during election campaigns as they are then particularly dependent on (positive) news coverage. In line with that, Meeks (2020) found that Donald Trump attacked the media less often on Twitter during the campaign period than after being elected as president. Thus, one can expect that *delegitimizing media criticism is less prevalent during election campaigns (H3).*

2. Current research on the connection of populism and the delegitimization of journalism often focuses on right-wing populists (Haller and Holt 2019; Meeks 2020), which can be explained by the popularity of these actors in western countries. However, theoretically, the anti-elitist characteristic relates to both right- and left-wing populism, which is why we will analyze the connection between delegitimizing media criticism and populism as a whole.

6. Methods

6.1 Case selection

We study the use of media criticism by politicians in Germany and Austria, two multi-party systems with similar party families. Both countries have experienced growing political hostility towards journalism in recent years (Reporters without Borders 2019), especially by populist politicians who have become increasingly successful (Newman et al. 2018). In Germany, the media are especially confronted with *lying press* ("Lügenpresse") accusations by the far-right movement Pegida (Holt and Haller 2017) and the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) frequently attacks the mainstream media, for example, using the term "Pinocchio press" (Holt and Haller 2017). In Austria, members of the far-right populist Freedom Party Austria (FPÖ) were involved in harsh attacks towards the media and journalists several times (Newman et al. 2019).

6.2 Sample

The sample of our manual content analysis consists of Facebook postings by all major parties and their main candidates, which consider the news media in one way or another between 01.01.2017 and 20.12.2017 ($N = 2{,}921$).[3] Both countries held national elections in this period (Austria: October 15, Germany: September 24). The analyzed data was scraped in the context of another project (Gründl 2020). We chose Facebook as it is the most popular social media platform for news use in Austria and Germany (Newman et al. 2019). What is more, on Facebook, there is more populist communication compared to Twitter, which is a relevant factor for this study (Ernst et al. 2017).

6.3 Coding procedure

The content analysis consisted of two steps: First, to capture those postings that refer to news media and journalism, we developed an extensive search string, consisting of general terms (e.g., "media", "news", "journalism".), the names of specific media outlets and formats in Austria (e.g., *ORF*), Germany (e.g., *ARD*), and a selected number of international outlets and formats (e.g., *CNN, BBC*), as well as the names of popular journalists in Austria, Germany, and several international journalists. Furthermore, we also included terms that are prominently used in attacks on journalism, such as "fake news" and "lying press" (the complete search

3. An overview of all analyzed actors can be found in Appendix A.

string can be found in Appendix B). We ran this search string over a sample consisting of all postings by the relevant actors in 2017 ($N = 16{,}619$), which resulted in a sub-sample of 6,818 postings. As the search string consisted of various terms that are often used in contexts unrelated to news media (e.g., two of the Austrian news outlets are called *Heute (Today)* and *Österreich (Austria))*, this sample was then manually evaluated for the presence of references to journalism, resulting in the final sample of 2,921 postings.

In the next step, the final sample was analyzed manually by four coders. The coders were all native speakers, two from Germany and two from Austria. We developed an extensive codebook to capture possible ways how politicians can refer to journalists and news media.

6.4 Measures

The codebook contained a number of variables to capture how politicians deal with journalistic actors (i.e., journalists and outlets) and products.[4] First, we coded the *addressed journalistic actor* in the social media posting. When a posting mentioned several news media or journalists, the first two mentioned were coded. All mentioned news outlets, formats, and journalists were coded as open texts, which were grouped in four categories after coding was finalized: (a) *media in general*; (b) *public service broadcasting and quality newspaper*, (c) *commercial broadcasting and tabloid newspaper*, and (d) *alternative news outlets*.

Next, we coded the *context of references to the media.* Here, we distinguished between the following contexts in which journalistic actors or products were mentioned: (a) promoting *own appearance in journalistic coverage* (i.e., announcements of interviews or talk shows with the politician themselves or a member of their party); (b) mentioning the *appearance in journalistic coverage of other political actors*; (c) *media criticism* (i.e., any negative evaluation about journalistic actors or products), (d) *positive evaluation of media coverage*, (e) *emphasizing the democratic relevance of journalism* (e.g., arguments for press freedom); or (f) *demand for abolition or reform of broadcasting fees.*

When a posting included media criticism, several additional variables were coded. First, it was dichotomously coded whether one of the following *issues was addressed in the criticism:* (a) *partisan bias accusation* (i.e., any argument stating that parties/ politicians/ ideologies are presented unfairly/ unsuitably/ insufficiently); (b) *non-partisan bias accusation* (i.e., it is argued that any other actors (such as immigrants) or topics (such as climate change) are presented unfairly/

4. A translated version of the codebook (from German to English) can be found in Appendix C.

unsuitably/ insufficiently), (c) *quality of journalistic coverage* is criticized (i.e., criticisms relate to triviality, emotionalization or sensationalism); and (d) *attribution of falsehood* (i.e., it is said that coverage is at parts or completely factually incorrect). When attributions of falsehood were present, we additionally coded whether the political actors claim that this *factual incorrectness is intentional* (to distinguish between accusations of *mis* – and *dis*information). Lastly, we coded whether political actors used the *fake news label* against journalistic actors and products.

For the *characteristics of delegitimizing media criticism*, it was dichotomously coded whether the critique is accompanied by any *argumentation* (i.e., somewhat additional explanation on why the journalistic actor or product is being criticized). The presence of *incivility* towards journalistic actors was dichotomously coded; based on selected incivility characteristics of Sobieraj and Berry (2011), namely "insulting language", "name-calling", "character assassination", "belittling", and "obscene language".

Other relevant variables for our analyses are the *election campaign period* (defined as the two months preceding each election; e.g., Aaldering and Vliegenthart 2016) and whether a politician can be characterized as *populist* (based on Rooduijn et al. (2019), we characterized eight actors as populist, i.e. the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and its then leader Strache, The Alternative of Germany (AfD) and its then leaders Gauland and Weidel, the German Left (DIE LINKE) and its then leaders Wagenknecht and Bartsch. Furthermore, we included the following control variables in our analyses: the *ideological stance* of each party (based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2017; Bakker et al. 2020);[5] *incumbency* (whether actors were holding office at the time of each posting), the *country* (German vs. Austrian), the *total number of postings* an actor created in 2017, the *total number of media references* an actor posted in 2017, and *the month* in which the posting was created.

6.5 Intercoder reliability

Intercoder reliability scores (Krippendorff's α) ranged from 0.75 to 0.92, except for three variables that rarely occurred (i.e., fake news accusation: 0.58; intentionality of factual incorrectness: 0.58, and incivility: 0.42). However, these variables have very skewed distributions, in which case Krippendorff's alpha is likely too conservative (Lombard et al. 2002). Thus, we also calculated Brennan and

5. As the Austrian party „Liste Pilz" is not included in CHES, we used the estimate provided by the AUTNES Multi Model Panel Study 2017 (Kritzinger et al. 2018) and rescaled this to comparable CHES scores.

Prediger's kappa, a measure that is more robust for assessing agreement of variables that are not well-distributed (Quarfoot and Levine 2016). Here, coefficients showed acceptable scores (0.69; 0.82, and 0.84 respectively). Percentage agreement ranged from 0.79 to 0.99.[6]

7. Results

7.1 Descriptive results

Of all 2,921 postings, about nine percent of the postings ($n = 276$) mentioned a second media outlet, resulting in a total of 3,197 references to a media outlet or a journalist. Of these, 54% stem from Austrian and about 46% from German politicians.

Of all 3.197 references to the media, only 6.1% ($n = 195$) included media criticism. As seen in Figure 1, in the majority of the cases (65.2%), politicians mentioned the media in the context of their own appearances in news coverage, followed by postings mentioning the media appearance of members of other parties (28.1%). Interestingly, the analyzed social media postings more often included a positive evaluation of journalistic performance (16.7%) compared to a negative evaluation (i.e., media criticism). Very rarely, politicians emphasized the democratic relevance of journalism (2.9%) or discussed the abolition or reformation of public service fees (0.9%).

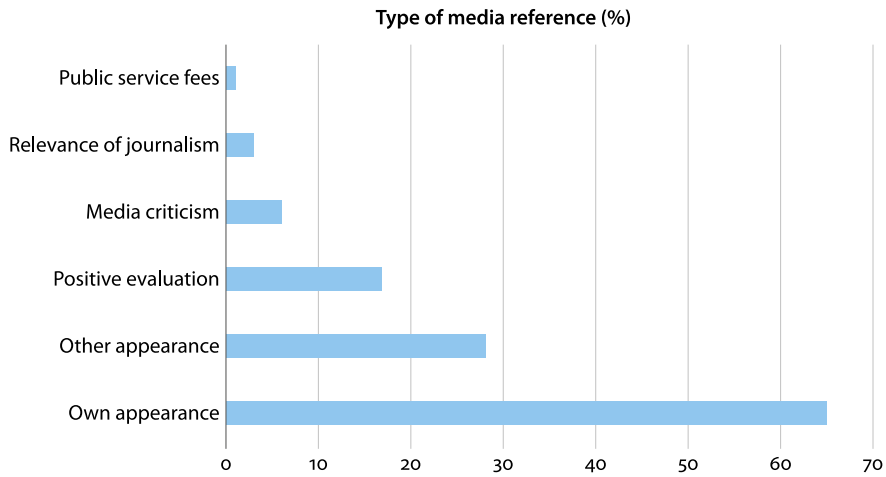

Figure 1. Overview types of references to the media ($N = 3,197$)

6. All scores can be seen in Appendix D.

7.2 Delegitimizing media criticism

Our first interest was the extent to which media criticism by politicians can be characterized as delegitimizing (RQ1). Of the 195 posts including media criticism, about 41% count as delegitimizing (2.5% of all references to the media). Most of these expressed criticisms (93.7%) were delegitimizing on one level: media criticism was either characterized by incivility (56.3%) or absence of argumentation (50%), while 6.3% were delegitimizing on both levels.

Next, we looked at the prevalence of fake news accusations in comparison to other issues raised in politicians' delegitimizing media criticism (RQ2). As seen in Figure 2, when politicians use delegitimizing media criticism, they most often accuse the media of being biased towards specific parties or ideologies (65%), followed by attributions of disinformation (35%), accusations of non-partisan bias (27.5%), and criticism concerning journalistic quality (23.8%). Attributions of misinformation, on the other hand, are rarely used (2.5%). In 19 postings (23.8%), politicians use the fake news label specifically against news media. Mostly it is used by populist politicians (18 out of 19 cases), directed at the media in general (9 cases), or public service broadcasting and quality newspapers (7 cases). In only three postings, politicians used it to attack commercial TV and tabloid newspapers, while it is never used against alternative news.

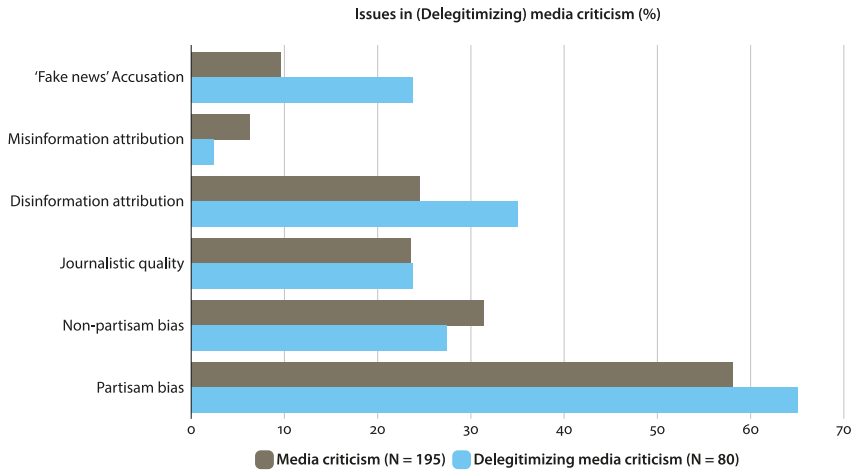

Figure 2. Issues of delegitimizing media criticism and media criticism in general

Overall, media criticism is rather rare in politicians' references to the media and of the present criticisms, not even half count as delegitimizing. The fake news label is scarcely expressed and almost exclusively by populists.

7.3 Determinants of delegitimizing media criticism

To assess the influence of the discussed determinants on the presence of delegitimizing media criticism, we calculate penalized logistic regression models. Additionally, we analyzed whether these factors also determine the usage of media criticism in general. Models are presented in Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix E.[7,8,9]

We predicted that populist politicians are more likely to use delegitimizing media criticism (**H1**). The populist actors in our sample indeed used significantly more delegitimizing media criticism ($b = 1.34$, $SE = .49$, $p < .01$), as well as significantly more media criticism in general ($b = 1.11$, $SE = .27$, $p < .01$), than non-populist actors, as is shown in Figure 3 (see also model 4 in Table 1 and 2). We, thus, find support for H1. Furthermore, as these results show that populist actors are a strong determinant of (delegitimizing) media criticism, we also consider how populist actors matter for the two other determinants and include interaction effects between populist actors and addressed media types and campaign period, respectively.

Next, we hypothesized that most delegitimizing media criticism is expressed towards the media in general (**H2**). The results indicate that the media in general were significantly more often addressed with delegitimizing media criticism as well as media criticism in general than specific media types. More specifically, as seen in Figure 3, compared to the media in general, public service broadcasting (PSB) and quality newspapers (delegitimizing: $b = -1.84$, $SE = .28$, $p < .001$; general: $b = -2.31$, $SE = .21$, $p < .001$), commercial TV stations and tabloid newspapers (delegitimizing: $b = -3.25$, $SE = .50$, $p < .001$; general: $b = -3.51$, $SE = .34$, $p < .001$) and alternative news outlet (delegitimizing: $b = -2.04$, $SE = .60$, $p < .01$; general: $b = -3.30$, $SE = .53$, $p < .001$) all received significantly less (delegitimizing) media criticism (see also model 4 in Table 1 and 2). Thus, the findings lend support for H2.

7. As there are only 80 instances of delegitimizing media criticism in our sample (compared to 3,117 references to the media not including delegitimizing media criticism), we used penalized logistic regression analysis, a method to calculate logistic regressions for rare events (King and Zeng 2001).

8. We tested each determinant separately as well as controlled for the other determinants. Presented are the coefficients of the model controlling for all determinants.

9. Our research focus was not to investigate country differences. However, to test for robustness, we analyzed both countries separately. For media criticism in general the results are almost completely the same. For delegitimizing media criticism – probably due to a statistical power problem – we see that the direction of the effects remains the same, however, the effects are mostly not significant anymore. All analyses can be found in Appendix F.

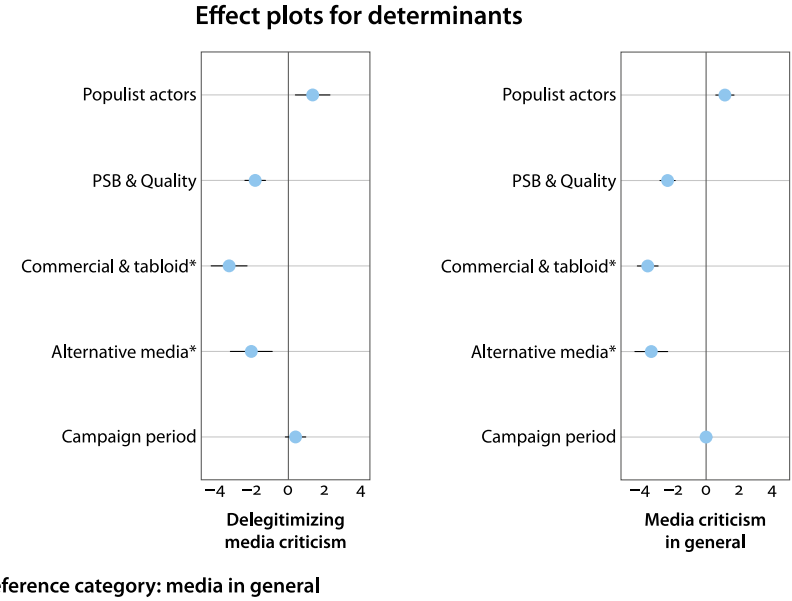

Figure 3. Effect plot of determinants of delegitimizing media criticism and media criticism in general (based on Model 4 of Table 1 and 2, Appendix E)

Furthermore, we tested whether there are differences between populist and non-populist actors in the media outlets they criticize. Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of populist actors for the different media outlets (based on the analyses in model 5 of Table 1 and 2). It shows that populist actors significantly more often criticize the media in general (delegitimizing: $b = 1.89$, $SE = .76$, $p < .05$; general: $b = 1.70$, $SE = .44$, $p < .001$) and the quality media and PSB (delegitimizing: $b = 1.34$, $SE = .53$, $p < .05$; general: $b = .99$, $SE = .30$, $p < .01$), while they significantly less often express (delegitimizing) media criticism towards alternative media than non-populist actors (delegitimizing: $b = -2.31$, $SE = 1.13$, $p < .05$; general: $b = -2.01$, $SE = .95$, $p < .05$). There are no differences between populists and non-populists in their use of media criticism against tabloid news (delegitimizing: $b = 1.83$, $SE = 1.54$, $p > .05$; general: $b = .75$, $SE = .73$, $p > .05$).

Lastly, we expected that politicians use less delegitimizing media criticism during campaign periods (**H3**). As Figure 3 shows, the presence of a campaign period does not have a significant effect on either delegitimizing media criticism ($b = .36$, $SE = .30$, $p > .05$) or media criticism in general ($b = .003$, $SE = .20$, $p > .05$). This means that politicians equally often criticize the media (in a delegitimizing way) during campaign periods as in times of routine politics. These findings do not lend support for H3.

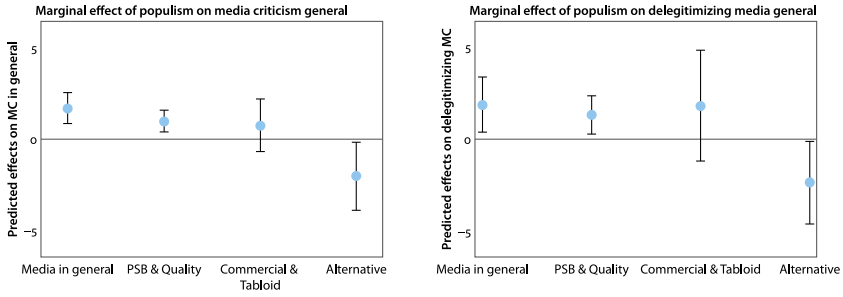

Figure 4. Effects of populist actors on delegitimizing media criticism and media criticism in general for each media type (based on Model 5 of Table 1 and 2, Appendix E)

We additionally tested whether the effect of campaign periods on (delegitimizing) media criticism is moderated by populist actors. Figure 5 shows the marginal effects of campaign periods on (delegitimizing) media criticism for populist vs. non-populist actors (based on the analyses in model 6 of Table 1 and 2). The figure shows that the impact of the campaign period of the expression of (delegitimizing) media criticism is not significant, both for populist (delegitimizing: $b = .46$, $SE = .33$, $p > .05$; general: $b = .17$, $SE = .23$, $p > .05$) and non-populist actors (delegitimizing: $b = .1$, $SE = .57$, $p > .05$, general: $b = -.39$, $SE = .38$, $p > .05$).

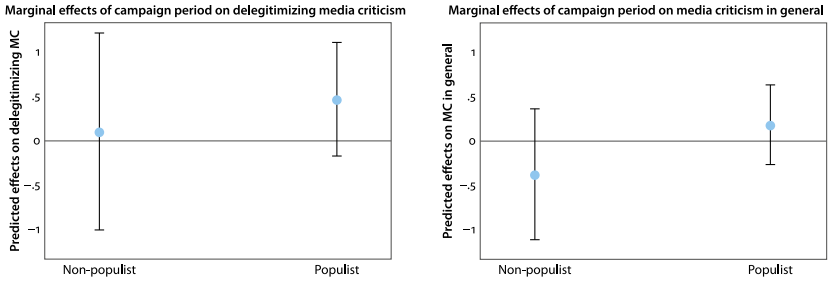

Figure 5. Effects of campaign period on delegitimizing media criticism and media criticism in general for populist and non-populist actors (based on Model 6 of Table 1 and 2, Appendix E)

8. Conclusion

Media criticism plays an essential role in democracies. Recently, however, worries about the nature of publicly expressed media criticism by politicians have been growing (Reporters without Borders 2018). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first systematic analysis of media criticism expressed by populist and

non-populist politicians. We find that media criticism is rather rare – compared to positive and neutral references to the media – and that less than half of it is delegitimizing. However, most media criticism (delegitimizing or not) is voiced by populist politicians and directed at the media in general. The presence of an election campaign does not affect the amount of (delegitimizing) media criticism, both for populist and non-populist actors. The most frequently used grounds for (delegitimizing) media criticism are partisan bias accusations and accusations of mis- or disinformation. The fake news label itself is rather rarely used by German and Austrian politicians.

This paper contributes to existing research in several ways. First, our findings show that in relation to all media references, Austrian and German politicians do not use delegitimizing media criticism – as well as the much-discussed phrase "fake news " – very often. This suggests that harsh media criticism and the usage of the fake news label by politicians may be less prevalent in the western European context than in the US. This finding is consistent with comparative research that suggests that the US represents a very specific case, characterized by relatively low levels of media trust, high levels of polarization and fragmentation, where media are not only regularly confronted with hostility by their political leader but also by social media users in general (Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst 2020; Humprecht, Hellmueller, and Lischka 2020). Thus, our findings suggest that worries about increasing delegitimizing media criticism by politicians might rather be a result of the salient discussions of US events than actual growth of attacks outside the US context (Egelhofer et al. 2020). Importantly, in this context, two incidents where Austrian politicians indeed have used the fake news label against news media resulted in lawsuits (Die Presse 2017) – demonstrating that acceptance for these forms of media criticism is low in the German-speaking context.

However, while politicians' delegitimizing media criticism is relatively low on social media, it still might have consequences. For example, harsh media attacks by populists likely generate a lot of media coverage (Denner and Peter 2017; Egelhofer et al. 2020) – thereby reaching a large audience. As research indicates that citizens are influenced by media criticism of other social media users (Naab et al. 2020) as well as the news coverage of politicians' criticism (Guess et al. 2018), even a few incidents of delegitimizing media criticism might decrease levels of media trust and foster polarization of media diets between citizens with populist and non-populist attitudes. Future research on the (long-term) effects of politicians' delegitimizing media criticism is thus urgently needed (see also Fawzi 2020). Furthermore, we see a need for research on the effects of such media criticism on journalists. More specifically, studies are needed that investigate to which forms of media criticism journalists are willing to respond to and act on (considering that the goal of media criticism should be improving journalistic coverage;

Fawzi 2020; Wyatt 2007; 2019) and to which forms journalists react with coping strategies that are harmful to journalism such as self-censorship (e.g., Chen et al. 2020; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016).

Second, our findings show that *when* delegitimizing media criticism occurs, it is mostly populist politicians who use it. Here, our findings are in line with research that suggests that populists use more media criticism than non-populist actors and especially express negative views towards public service broadcasters, quality news media, and importantly against the media in general, while they barely criticize alternative news outlets (Engesser et al. 2016; Meeks 2020; Van Dalen 2019). Furthermore, our findings indeed indicate that the fake news label can be considered populist terminology. This complements research that suggests that populists have an inherently ideological view about truth – in which they (and the people) know and tell the "real" truth while the establishment or elites spread lies, disinformation – and "fake news" (Hameleers 2020a; 2020b; Waisbord 2018). At the same time, our results also show that the populist actors in our sample more often refer to the media neutrally or positively than they criticize them – underlining the populists' "paradoxical" relationship with the media (Fawzi 2020; Haller and Holt 2018).

Lastly, we provide an operational definition of what forms of media criticism may be considered harmful in democratic politics and apply these to empirical data. In doing so, we follow previous calls in the field to strengthen the normative orientation of empirical political communication research (see Althaus 2012). Moreover, we embed the much-debated fake news label into the broader framework of delegitimizing media criticism. Thereby this study adds to the literature on fake news, which is heavily focused on disinformation (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019), and complements research that acknowledges the importance of studying the discursive use of the term "fake news" (e.g., Farhall et al. 2020; Farkas and Schou 2018). In this context, we show that the rallying cry "fake news" coined by Donald Trump has indeed been appropriated by politicians outside the US – however, only rarely and by a limited group of actors (see also Farhall et al. 2020).

Naturally, our study has caveats. First, we present findings of politicians' media references on Facebook. While we consider Facebook a most likely case to find politicians' media criticism – being the most used social medium for news in Austria and Germany (Newman et al. 2018), providing politicians with unfiltered direct communication possibilities – we cannot make comparisons with other social media platforms or other digital forms of communication where politicians might voice their media criticism. It might also be the case that delegitimizing media criticism in Austria and Germany is not primarily expressed by politicians directly – but more so by hyper-partisan media (e.g., Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Van Dalen 2019). Furthermore, our analysis focused on the con-

tent of politicians' social media postings and did not consider the user reactions. Future research could analyze how delegitimizing media criticism on social media engages users – for example, whether incivility in elites' media criticism leads to more uncivil user comments or even hate-speech towards journalists.

In sum, this study offers new insights on the discussions about the politicians' relationship to the media and represents an important building block for future studies on delegitimizing media criticism.

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The Differential Effects of Disinformation Accusations on (Populist) Citizens

Accusing the media of spreading disinformation or "fake news" has become an increasingly popular rhetorical device for populist politicians. However, empirical research on the effects of these accusations is limited. This survey experiment (N = 1,330) tests to what extent disinformation accusations impact citizens' trust of a) the news media, b) the information they provide, and c) the politician using these accusations, and whether these effects depend on citizens' populist attitudes. Moreover, we investigate whether including the phrase "fake news" serves as a heuristic and leads to stronger effects than disinformation accusations without this phrase. Results show that disinformation accusations reduce citizens' trust in the accused news outlet and perceived accuracy of the news message, while trust in the politician is largely unaffected. General media trust is only reduced for citizens with strong populist attitudes. Crucially, the phrase "fake news" does not serve as a heuristic in these effects.

Keywords: disinformation accusation; fake news; populist attitudes; media attacks; media trust; politician perceptions; accuracy perceptions

The Differential Effects of Disinformation Accusations on (Populist) Citizens

The prevalence of disinformation and fake news in today's fragmented media environment is arguably "*the* defining political communication topic of our time" (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 145). Notably, the pervasiveness of incorrect and dishonest information in political communication encompasses not only its *actual* spread but also its *discursive* construction (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020). That is, while there is legitimate concern about the spread of disinformation, it has also become a convenient discounting strategy for politicians to blame opposing media and political actors for intentionally spreading falsehood and deceiving the public (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Jahng et al., 2021).

The most prominent type of disinformation accusations is using the word "fake news" against news media. Disinformation allegations are used by an increasing number of politicians around the globe (The New York Times, 2019), many of which can be described as authoritarian (Neo, 2020; Reporters without Borders, 2017). However, these accusations are also a popular tool in (western) democracies, where mostly populist politicians use them (Hameleers, 2020). For example, the "lying press" accusations have a long-standing history in European countries (Holt & Haller, 2017). As politicians have considerable influence on the public's opinion about which information (sources) to trust, these accusations might have critical consequences for citizens' trust in news media and their coverage (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). As an authoritative information source, the media play a key role in providing citizens with the information they need for meaningful political participation, defining reality, and holding politicians accountable. If journalism and established information are not trusted by (parts of) society, this can lead to situations where

facts are seen as equal to opinions and political opponents cannot agree on a common factual reality (Salgado, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Van Dalen, 2019).

Despite these potentially severe consequences, the effects of disinformation accusations have hardly been studied. Few studies, focusing on the U.S. context, offer an inconclusive picture of whether disinformation accusations by politicians have negative or even positive effects on how trustworthy citizens perceive news outlets and their coverage (e.g., Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Tamul et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is evidence that not all citizens are affected in the same way (Guess et al., 2017). This suggests that disinformation accusations actually have moderated effects. In light of who uses this discounting strategy most prevalently, populist attitudes are likely the missing link in these effects.

Populism advocates a binary vision of truth, which entails a general resentment of facts and authoritative information sources and an affinity of politicians who blame the "elite" media (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). This aversion against news media is expressed by populist politicians and citizens alike (Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Hameleers et al., 2021). Thus, disinformation accusations against the media strongly coincide with populist communication strategies.

Strikingly, whether disinformation accusations have (unintended backfire) effects on citizens' perceptions of the politician who is using them has not been tested at all. While populist citizens likely approve of politicians who, in their eyes, expose the media's lies, other citizens might be concerned about this political weaponization of disinformation (e.g., Newman, 2019).

Lastly, there are worries that the phrase "fake news" in disinformation accusations might be particularly harmful. This concern is based on the fact that the term is connected to a broader debate of the threat of disinformation and general uncertainty about what is true and false in modern political communication environments (Habgood-Coote, 2019; Reporters

without Borders, 2017; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Using this salient buzzword in disinformation accusations might thus be especially effective in casting doubts about information and news media. However, whether "fake news" indeed serves as a heuristic that leads to stronger effects remains to be tested.

Therefore, we conducted an online survey experiment (N = 1,330), testing whether there are differential effects of disinformation accusations, including or excluding the word "fake news" on citizens' perceptions of the media, the information provided by them, and the politician who is using these accusations. For all these effects, we take into account the moderating role of populist attitudes. This allows us to show how disinformation accusations affect multiple outcomes differently for different citizens. Thereby, we provide a more comprehensive picture of the consequences of the strategic utilization of the threat represented by disinformation. By setting our study in Austria, we provide a West European perspective and expand our knowledge of disinformation accusations beyond the U.S. context.

Disinformation Accusations as Populist Communication Strategy

Today's political communication era is characterized by post-factual relativism, where facts are increasingly dismissed or seen as equal to opinion. This trend expresses itself in a prevalence of mis- and disinformation on the one hand and attacks on authoritative information sources such as news media on the other (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Disinformation is primarily understood as inaccurate information created or spread with a clear intention to deceive or manipulate. Misinformation, on the other hand, is inaccurate information that is created or spread unintentionally (or at least the intentionality cannot be detected) (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020). Recently, scholars increasingly acknowledge that the threat of untruthfulness encompasses its actual spread and its *discursive* construction (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Neo, 2020). That is, the supply of mis- and disinformation is accompanied

by a salient discussion of the democratic threat posed by these concepts in the mainstream press (Farhall et al., 2019; Tsfati et al., 2020) and on social media (Brummette et al., 2018; Hameleers, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020; Farhall et al., 2019; Neo, 2020). Arguably, this salient debate has enabled an instrumentalization of the fears attached to these concepts. Political actors around the globe accuse media actors and political actors with opposing views of spreading mis- and disinformation. Notably, both misinformation and disinformation accusations state that a piece of information is incorrect. However, disinformation accusations also imply that the source of said piece of information has an intention to deceive (e.g., Hameleers, 2020).

Disinformation accusations violate norms of political discussions as prescribed by deliberative democratic theory. Deliberation as a normative framework of what determines "good" democracy stresses the importance of free debate between citizens, resulting in collective decision-making. Essential norms of deliberative discourse are civility and (rational) complex arguments (e.g., Dryzek et al., 2019; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Disinformation accusations violate these core criteria as they entail lying allegations which are, per definition, uncivil (Coe et al., 2014; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Jahng et al., 2021). Furthermore, they are often fact-free, accompanied by simplistic (if any) argumentation (Authors; Hameleers, 2020).

Disinformation and its discursive constructions share a conceptual affinity with populism (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). Populism has been defined as a "thin ideology" (Mudde, 2004) that emphasizes a binary worldview in which the "evil" elite is distinguished from the "true" and "honest" people. This anti-elitism encompasses the political establishment, economic elites, and, importantly, authoritative information sources such as the media. Central to populist communication strategies is the idea of scapegoating and attributions of blame. The elite is blamed for societal problems (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). In this context, the media

elite is blamed for the problem of disinformation. This "anti-media populism" describes journalists as enemies who do not serve the people's interests but conspire with the political elite (Krämer, 2018, see also Fawzi, 2020).

Notably, the divide between the ordinary people and the elites also encompasses a divide of what is seen as truth. That is, the people speak the truth while the elites spread lies (Waisbord, 2018). Therefore, anti-press rhetoric, harsh media criticism – and disinformation accusations specifically – can be seen as part of the standard repertoire in populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017; Fawzi, 2020; Hameleers, 2020). This affinity between communicative untruthfulness and populism is mirrored in content analyses that show that disinformation accusations and delegitimizing media criticism are mainly used by populist actors (Farhall et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020). It is also evident in survey research that shows that citizens holding populist attitudes are particularly distrustful towards the media (Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018) and hold stronger perceptions that the media are actively disseminating disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2021). However, to our knowledge, no effect studies are demonstrating this affinity yet. Accordingly, we aim to fill this gap and investigate the moderating role of populist attitudes in all effects of disinformation accusations outlined below.

Effects of Disinformation Accusations

News consumption increasingly takes place on social media (Newman, 2019), where people often only read the previews of news articles instead of clicking on these to read the whole story (Bakshy et al., 2015). On social media, news messages are increasingly accompanied by (critical) commentary (Carlson, 2016). These critical cues often receives more attention than the news preview itself, influencing subsequent evaluations of said news preview (Anspach & Carlson, 2020). Disinformation accusations – initiated by populist politicians and

echoed by many social media users (e.g., Brummette et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020) – represent one type of this commentary that accompanies news stories on these networks. Since the rhetoric of political elites is of great importance in shaping public opinion (Ladd, 2012; Zaller, 1992), disinformation accusations by politicians might be even more consequential than those of fellow social media users.

The question is, what exactly are the consequences when politicians attach disinformation accusations to news article previews on social media? Disinformation accusations contradict the claim of the news article. Thus, two conflicting pieces of information are involved, which lead to "uncertainty within the readers, and cause them to question the veracity of either piece of information" (Anspach & Carlson, 2020, p. 703). This uncertainty then likely influences how trustworthy citizens perceive a) the source of the claim (i.e., the media), b) the claim itself (i.e., the issue stance of the article), and c) the source of the disinformation accusation (i.e., the politician).

Effects on Media Trust

First, there have been worries that the increase of politicians' disinformation accusations against news media has had detrimental effects on individual-level media trust (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). Media trust is essential in democracies, as citizens rely on news media to provide them with factual information for their decision-making. Media trust always entails uncertainty within news users who never know journalists' true intentions (e.g., Tsfati, 2010). Not being able to verify each news message themselves, however, they have to find clues to justify their trust (Kohring, 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). A disinformation accusation as such a clue makes a statement about the content itself (i.e., that it is incorrect) *and* about the journalists' intention (i.e., that they intentionally lie). Therefore, it seems plausible that these accusations harm news media trust.

However, the few studies on this matter provide mixed evidence. Some scholars find the expected negative effect of disinformation accusations on trust in a media source (Anspach & Carlson, 2020), while others show no effects, or even positive effects, on credibility perceptions (Tamul et al., 2019). Another study finds that only those who support the politician using the accusations are negatively affected (Guess et al., 2017). This finding suggests that disinformation accusations might not have direct but moderated effects. Partisanship is seemingly an important factor in this context. However, there are ideologies that transcend singular parties, such as populism (Mudde, 2004). Especially in Europe, where multiple parties exist whose policies are more homogenous than in two-party systems (e.g., Ennser, 2010), populist attitudes might indeed be a better predictor. In line with this, survey data suggests that while in the U.S. media perceptions are divided by partisan ideology (Guess et al., 2017), in Europe, (strong) populist attitudes are a key factor explaining negative media perceptions (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Specifically, we expect populist attitudes to moderate the impact of disinformation accusations on media trust in two ways: On the one hand, as outlined above, citizens with strong populist attitudes are likely more susceptible to this type of blame attributions. On the other hand, for citizens with weak populist attitudes, there might be a boomerang effect at play. That is, they might perceive these accusations as a blatant manipulation attempt and react with an increase in media trust. This might explain why Tamul and colleagues (2019) found that disinformation accusations actually led participants to react with more positive attitudes towards news stories. Similarly, *The New York Times* experienced an increase in subscriptions in early 2017, right after Donald Trump started accusing the outlet of spreading disinformation (Chapman, 2017).

Thus, our first hypothesis reads: *The impact of disinformation accusations on media trust is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that a) stronger populist attitudes result in a negative effect and b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a positive effect (H1).*

Effects on Accuracy Perceptions

Citizens worldwide are concerned about the prevalence and threat of disinformation (Newman, 2019). Thus, it is likely that citizens are very susceptible to attributions of disinformation. In other words, citizens perceive disinformation to be omnipresent and are thus worried about being influenced by it. Consequently, disinformation accusations that accompany news article previews on social media potentially misguide citizens' evaluations of the accuracy of the information and lead them to disagree with the issue stance of a said news story. Indeed, Anspach and Carlson (2020) found that when individuals are exposed to a factual news story accompanied by discounting commentary, they are misinformed about the featured issue. Similarly, Jahng et al. (2021) show that disinformation accusations attached to news stories led participants to identify the message as real news less accurately.

As mentioned above, disinformation accusations are predominantly employed by populist politicians, and citizens' perceptions of the prevalence of disinformation are strongly related to populist attitudes in European countries (Hameleers et al., 2021). Therefore, disinformation accusations are possibly seen as a populist statement that is more congruent with citizens with strong populist attitudes. Populist citizens might thus be more prone to believe these accusations and perceive the news story's issue stance as less accurate. Thus, we investigate *whether being exposed to information that is accompanied by disinformation accusations will a) lead to lower accuracy perceptions, as well as b) to what extent populist attitudes moderate these effects? (RQ1)*[1]

Effects on Politician Perceptions

Political elites' rhetoric not only affects public opinion about issues and external actors (such as news media) but also the perception of the elite actors themselves (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2011). Therefore, we consider whether the use of disinformation accusations has consequences for how citizens perceive the politician. As explained above, disinformation accusations violate social norms of political discourse, as they are uncivil, mostly ill-justified, and often factually incorrect. There are mixed findings on whether violating these norms has positive or negative effects on how people perceive a politician (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Mölders & Van Quaquebeke, 2017). Incivility, for example, has been shown to lower political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). At the same time, it is argued that populists' success in past elections is partly based on their uncivil rhetoric (which includes disinformation accusations) (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020).

An explanation for why violations of discourse norms are appreciated by some and disapproved by others is the fact that citizens who feel that the political establishment does not represent their interests, disagree with socially endorsed norms of conversation, and feel that "publicly-endorsed norms are imposed rather than freely chosen" (Hahl et al., 2018, p.6). Thus, when a political actor violates social norms, people who feel represented by the political establishment will perceive this actor more negatively. However, citizens who do not feel represented by the political establishment will evaluate the actor more positively (Hahl et al., 2018). As outlined above, populists do not feel represented by the establishment. Thus, citizens with populist attitudes might perceive violations of norms positively, while the opposite is true for citizens with low or no populist attitudes. As mentioned before, populists especially hold negative attitudes towards one part of the establishment: the media. Consequently, for populist citizens, a politician who uses lying accusations against (factual) media content might "be perceived as bravely speaking a deep and otherwise suppressed truth" (Hahl et al., 2018, p. 3).

Related to this, Gooevarts and Marien (2020) show that when politicians use incivility and simplistic argumentation, it has adverse effects on their trustworthiness, however not for politically cynical citizens, which are also often populist (e.g., Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013).

To sum up, we suspect that a negative effect on perceptions of the accusing politician will only occur for citizens holding weak or no populist attitudes: *The impact of disinformation accusations on the perception of the accusing politician is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that a) stronger populist attitudes result in a positive effect and b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a negative effect. (H2)*.

The Role of the Phrase "Fake News"

One type of disinformation, fake news, has attracted particular interest in recent years. Scholars have defined "fake news" as deliberate falsehoods made to look like legitimate news articles (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). However, the word "fake news" is also used by numerous governing politicians worldwide as a label to discredit news media (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Neo, 2020; The News York Times Editorial Board, 2019). Thus, the fake news label arguably represents the most prominently discussed disinformation accusation.

Drawing on the literature of priming and dual-process models, scholars have argued that "fake news" has become a highly accessible cue when citizens evaluate news media content (Jahng et al., 2021; Tamul et al., 2019; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). At the most basic level, dual-process models, such as System 1 and System 2 processing (Kahnemann, 2011), explain that citizens process persuasive messages in two distinct modes: one is fast and automatic and demands minimal cognitive resources, while the other is slow, controlled and more cognitively demanding. In the automatic processing mode, individuals rely on heuristic cues or primes, i.e., information bits that are readily available in memory and are easily

"activated" when processing related information. Priming can be seen as part of automatic or System 1 processing and occurs when individuals are influenced by informational cues from media coverage or public discourses (i.e., a prime) but are unaware of the origin of said influence (Hoewe, 2020). Against this background, scholars suggested that the phrase "fake news" has become an effective prime that is easily activated when individuals process the factuality of information (Tamul et al., 2019; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019).

Indeed, since 2016, "fake news" has been ubiquitously used in public discourse and news coverage where it is not only used to report on disinformation or media attacks but was also normalized to articulate that some bit of information is incorrect (Brummette et al., 2018; Farhall et al., 2019). The salience of the term in connection to the threat of political disinformation and flaws in journalism might have contributed to a "perceived consumption" of fake news, i.e., an exaggerated estimation of how much false information oneself and others are exposed to (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2021). Arguably, this likely has rendered the phrase fake news a highly accessible prime when individuals evaluate the truthfulness of the information in general and media content specifically. We thus expect stronger effects of disinformation accusations when "fake news" is present. Based on the above, our third hypothesis reads: *The effects of disinformation accusations on (a) media trust and (b) politician perceptions are stronger for disinformation accusations including "fake news" compared to disinformation accusations excluding "fake news." (H3)* Moreover, we investigate *whether the effect of disinformation accusations on accuracy perceptions is stronger for disinformation accusations including "fake news" compared to disinformation accusations without the phrase. (RQ2)*

Method

Design, Sample, and Procedure

Our study is set in Austria, a country with a strong populist party, i.e., the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)), whose members frequently have used disinformation accusations against news media (Reporters without Borders, 2018).

In our between-subjects online survey experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups or a control group. All groups were exposed to a fictional politician's Twitter page. In the two experimental conditions, the tweets on this page contained disinformation accusations: in one condition, the tweets explicitly mentioned the phrase "fake news." In the other condition, tweets communicated that information is factually incorrect and deliberately so without using this phrase. The groups will henceforth be labeled *fake news condition* and *disinformation condition*. In the control condition, the tweets did not include disinformation accusations.[2] Prior to data collection in June 2020, we pre-registered the hypotheses, method and planned analyses on the Open Science Framework (OSF)[3] and obtained the university's institutional review board approval. A varied sample of Austrian citizens (aged 18 and older; M = 41.4, SD = 15.1; 46% female, 53% male) was recruited by the panel agency *Dynata.* Randomization checks revealed successful randomization of age ($F(2, 1327) = .30$, $p = .74$), gender ($X^2(4, 1330) = 4.5247$, $p = .34$), political ideology ($F(2, 1327) = .29$, $p = .75$), and populist attitudes ($F(2, 1327) = .18$, $p = .84$).

The total sample size was N = 1,330[4] (fake news: 480, disinformation: 403, control: 447). After reading and signing an informed consent form, participants first answered questions about their socio-demographic information, as well as populist attitudes. Then, they were exposed to the stimulus Twitter page and answered questions measuring the dependent variables. At the end of the survey, respondents were thoroughly debriefed.

Stimulus Material

We used constructed Twitter pages of a fictive politician in an Austrian municipality. Using fictive politicians in experiments makes it possible to isolate the effects of the message

from partisan or ideological predispositions. This is especially relevant in multi-party systems, such as Austria. Therefore, using fictive actors is a common strategy in research on the effects of politicians' rhetoric (e.g., Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019).

The Twitter page contained eight tweets: two tweets presented a preview of a news article by the mid-range newspaper *Kleine Zeitung*, one of the oldest daily published newspapers in Austria. The topic of these articles was the link between the weed killer glyphosate and heightened cancer risk. One article also suggested that the usage of glyphosate should be prohibited in Austria. We chose a topic that is not too salient and politicized in public discourse to avoid overly clear association with a particular party or party politician. Four tweets gave some additional information about this topic; the other two tweets were unrelated to the topic (e.g., "Happy weekend").

In the experimental groups, three of the tweets contained disinformation accusations. In the fake news condition, the term itself was used, while in the disinformation condition, it was communicated that news coverage was false and deliberately so. For example, in the fake news condition, tweets said "excellent example of fake news!" and "What the fake news media do not report (…)"; in the disinformation condition, tweets stated "excellent example of faulty reporting!", "What the lying media do not report (…)".[5]

Manipulation Check

Respondents were asked to indicate on an 11-point scale how much they agree with two statements about the tweets they were exposed to: "The word 'fake news' was mentioned" and "The media were accused of lying." The manipulation check showed successful manipulation, participants in the fake news condition were more certain that the term "fake news" was present (M = 8.22, SD = 2.39) than those in the disinformation condition (M = 4.97, SD = 2.94) or control condition (M = 3.97, SD = 2.65), $F(2, 1327) = 326.55$, $p<.001$. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the differences between all three conditions were significant. Similarly,

participants in the fake news (*M* = 7.26, *SD* = 2.51) and disinformation conditions (*M* = 7.19, *SD* = 2.39) were more certain that media were accused of lying compared to the control condition (*M* = 5.01, *SD* = 2.53), F(2, 1327) = 118.79, $p<.001$. Post hoc analyses indicated that the fake news and disinformation conditions significantly differed from the control condition but not from each other.

Measures

All items were measured 11-point scales. Exact question wordings can be found in the Appendix B.

Media Trust

We distinguished between general media trust and trust in the accused outlet (*Kleine Zeitung*). Both were measured with a five-item scale, based on Tsfati (2010) and Strömbäck et al. (2020), asking respondents to indicate how suitable several characteristics (fair, accurate, unbiased, taking into account all facts, trustworthy) are to describe Austria's established media and their reporting (Cronbach's α= .90, *M* = 5.0, *SD* = .05) as well as the "Kleine Zeitung" (Cronbach's α= .93, *M* = 4.93, *SD* = .05).

Accuracy Perception

To measure perceptions of We asked participants how much they agree or disagree with the main claim regarding the issue in the news articles that was tweeted about, i.e., agreement with the general issue stance: "Glyphosate causes cancer" (*M* = 7.28, *SD* = .07).

Politician Perceptions

We focused on two perceptions of the accusing politician, i.e., perceived trustworthiness and the perception to what extent the politician tried to manipulate the participants (i.e., manipulative intent). Respondents were asked to indicate how trustworthy they perceived the politician (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = .07). To measure perceived manipulative intent,

we asked them how much they agree or disagree with the statement: “The politician tried to manipulate me” (M = 5.27, SD = .08).

Populist Attitudes

Populist attitudes were measured before exposure to the stimulus material, based on a selection of six items from the three-dimensional scale by Schulz et al. (2018) (2 items per dimension, i.e., anti-elitism; belief in the homogeneity of the people, demand for popular sovereignty; Cronbach’s α = 0.74; M = 6.53, SD = .05). Following our pre-registration, we aggregated the three dimensions into one variable. However, Wuttke et al. (2020) explain that the dimensions of populism are not compensatory. Thus, to check for robustness, we repeated all analyses with a non-compensatory measure of populist attitudes, i.e., the Goertzian approach. This measure uses the minimum value of the concept subdimensions (Wuttke et al., 2020). Results remain essentially the same and can be found in Appendix C.

Results

In the following, we first analyze the effects of disinformation accusations in general. That is, we compare both experimental conditions (including or excluding the word “fake news”) with the control condition.

Effects on Media Trust

We expected that the impact of disinformation accusations on media trust is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that a) stronger populist attitudes result in a negative effect and b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a positive effect (H1). Table 1 presents the results and shows that, as expected, there is no main effect of these accusations on general media trust (b= -.18, SE= .11, p = .11, model 1). Model 2 of Table 1 shows that there is a significant interaction effect of these accusations and populist attitudes on general media trust (b = -.16, SE = .07, p = .02). Figure 1 plots the marginal effects and shows that the impact of

disinformation accusations on general media trust is only significant for citizens with strong populist attitudes: these citizens show significantly less general media trust after being exposed to disinformation accusations.

Secondly, we test the impact of disinformation accusations on trust in the accused media outlet. Model 3 of Table 1 shows a significant negative main effect of a disinformation accusation (b = -.41, SE = .14, p<.001). Model 4 includes the interaction between the accusation conditions and populist attitudes and shows that this interaction effect is not significant (b = -.00, SE = .09, p = .99; see also figure 1). The effects of the disinformation accusations on outlet trust do not significantly differ between people with strong and weak populist attitudes.

In conclusion, our results only partially support H1: As expected, disinformation accusations only decrease general media trust for citizens with strong populist attitudes. However, trust in the accused media outlet is negatively affected for all people, independent of their populist attitudes.

[Figure 1]

Effects on Accuracy Perceptions

Next, we investigated whether being exposed to information accompanied by disinformation accusations will a) lead to less agreement with the news stories' issue stance and b) whether populist attitudes moderate this effect (RQ1). As can be seen in Table 1, citizens exposed to these accusations show significantly less agreement with the main claim of the articles (i.e., "Glyphosate causes cancer"), (b = -.33, SE = .14, p = .02, model 5). However, we find no interaction effect between the disinformation accusations and populist attitudes for agreement with the article claim (b = -.09, SE = .09, p = .32, model 6; see also Figure 2). This indicates no significant difference in the effects of disinformation accusations on accuracy perceptions between people with strong and weak populist attitudes. However, figure 2

indicates that the negative main effect of model 5 is only significant for people with moderate to strong populist attitudes.

In sum, disinformation accusations lead to less agreement with the accused news stories' issue stance, but populist attitudes do not significantly moderate this effect.

[Figure 2]

Effects on Politician Perceptions

We predicted that the effect of a disinformation accusation on perceptions of the politician is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that a) stronger populist attitudes result in a positive effect and b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a negative effect (H2). More specifically, we tested the effects of these accusations on participants' trustworthiness ratings and whether they felt that the politician wanted to manipulate their thoughts (i.e., manipulative intent). As can be seen in Table 1, there is no main effect of disinformation accusations on trustworthiness (b = -.20, SE = .15, p = .19, model 7). However, there is a significant positive main effect of the accusations on manipulative intent (b = .42, SE = .16, p = .01, model 9). Thus, our results show that while disinformation accusations lead people to feel that the politician wants to manipulate them, these accusations do not affect how much they trust the said politician. As shown in Figure 3, we do not find any interaction effects between the accusations and populist attitudes on trustworthiness (b = -.01, SE = .09, p = .93; model 8), or manipulative intent (b = .02, SE = .10, p = .86; model 10). Therefore, we find no support for H2.

[Figure 3]

[Table 1]

The Role of the Phrase "Fake News"

Next, we investigate whether the effects on media trust and politician trust (H3) as well as accuracy perceptions (RQ2) are stronger for the disinformation accusation, including the

word “fake news,” compared to the disinformation accusation not mentioning it. To test this, we ran the analyses from H1-2 and RQ1 again. However, instead of including the dummy variable for the presence of the disinformation accusation (disinformation condition and fake news condition vs. control condition) as the independent variable, we use a dummy variable for the type of the disinformation accusation (disinformation condition vs. fake news condition) as the independent variable. Thus, the following analyses are based on a comparison of the two experimental groups (N = 883). As seen in Table 2, there are no main effects of the type of disinformation accusation on general media trust (b = .14, SE = .13, p = .28, model 1) or trust in the news outlet (b = -.03, SE = .16, p = .85, model 3). Moreover, the interaction effect of the type of disinformation accusation and populist attitudes was not significant either for general media trust *(*b = -.00, SE = .08, p = .97 (model 2), or trust in the news outlet (b = -.01, SE = .10, p = .91, model 3). The phrase “fake news” does not determine the impact on media trust; what matters is the accusation of disinformation rather than the way this accusation is expressed.

Similarly, we did not find differences between the two groups for the accuracy perception of the main claim “Glyphosate causes cancer” (main effect: b = *-.27*, SE = .16, p = .10, model 5; interaction with populism: b = .07, SE = .10, p = .51, model 6). Again, this clearly shows that the phrase fake news is not the driving factor of its effects on issue perceptions.

Finally, there were also no differences for perceptions of the politician, i.e., trustworthiness (main effect: b = *.04*, SE = .17, p = .81, model 7; interaction with populism: b = -.07, SE = .10, p = .51, model 8), or manipulative intent (main effect: b = *.12*, SE = .19, p = .54, model 9, interaction with populism: b = .07, SE = .11, p = .55, model 10). So, also for the impact on perceptions of the accusing politician, the phrase “fake news” is not decisive. All in all, our results lend no support for H3, and seem to indicate that the phrase “fake news” is not a driving force in *any* effects of disinformation accusations on the outcomes.

[Table 2]

Discussion

Disinformation accusations as a political strategy to discredit news media and factual information are on the rise throughout the globe, and worries about their consequences are increasing (e.g., Reporters without Borders, 2017). At the same time, a growing body of literature points to a strong affinity between this strategy and populism (e.g., Hameleers, 2020). However, thus far, only a few studies have considered the effects of these accusations (e.g., Guess et al., 2017; Tamul et al., 2019), and no research has taken into account the role of populist attitudes.

Our results show that when politicians accuse news stories of disinformation, it negatively affects how accurate citizens perceive the information in said stories. It furthermore harms their trust in the specific media outlet that published it. This implies that these accusations present a threat to the journalists' role as providers of factual information. Contrary to our expectations, populist attitudes did not moderate these effects. However, we do find a moderation effect of populist attitudes for general media trust. Exposure to disinformation accusations significantly decreased general media trust for populist citizens but not for participants with weak populist attitudes. The strategic instrumentalization of the disinformation threat thus represents an effective tool to alter perceptions of specific sources and messages of the public in general. However, only populist citizens generalize these accusations to the media as a whole.

What are possible explanations for these differential effects? First, concern about being exposed to incorrect information in online news environments is widespread among citizens worldwide (Newman 2019), and a high share of people have doubts about their ability to recognize misleading information (Santhanam, 2020). Given this heightened uncertainty, it only seems logical that when confronted with disinformation cues, citizens quickly develop

doubts about the trustworthiness of specific messages or news sources online, independent of their populist views.

However, general media trust is known to be a relatively stable attitude (e.g., Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Therefore, for most citizens, there is no spill-over effect of one negative experience with a specific outlet to the media in general. However, citizens with strong populist views already tend to distrust the general media (Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2020) and regard them as sources of mis- and disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2021). Furthermore, research shows that populist politicians mainly use disinformation accusations as a sweeping blow against "the media" in general to delegitimize journalism as a whole (Authors; Meeks, 2019). Thus, when populist citizens are confronted with such accusations, they might recall this criticism and hence feel reaffirmed in their assumption that *all* mainstream media lie. Along these lines, disinformation accusations potentially amplify the existing polarization of trust in established media between populist and non-populist citizens (Van Dalen, 2019).

Furthermore, our results indicate that while citizens feel that politicians who use disinformation accusations want to manipulate them, this does not affect how trustworthy they perceive said politician. This might indicate that politicians can use these accusations without fearing backlashes on how the electorate perceives them. Similarly, previous research shows that participants do not change their perceptions of a politician who disseminated misinformation even when they acknowledge that said information is indeed incorrect (Nyhan et al., 2020; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020). While these studies investigated the effects of politicians' use of disinformation, we studied the effects of politicians' use of *accusations* of disinformation. Taken together, however, these results provide a pessimistic view of the role of truth in politicians' rhetoric. They seem to suggest that in an era of post-factual relativism (Van Aelst et al., 2017), politicians' *actual use* of disinformation and their *accusations* of disinformation have become normalized for modern political communication strategies to a

degree where they do not affect politicians' images. This is in line with Higgins' (2017, p. 9) observation that "public tolerance of inaccurate and undefended allegations (…) and outright denials of facts is shockingly high."

Importantly, our study provides some clarity regarding the consequences of the specific phrase "fake news." We do not find any differences, for any of our tested dependent variables, between the condition which mentioned the word "fake news" and the condition which did not. Consequently, politicians' accusations that the media are deliberately misleading the public are efficient in damaging citizens' perceptions of news media and the information provided by them, while the phrase "fake news" is not necessarily the driving factor for these effects. There are several possible explanations for this finding. First, it might be the case that the emergence of "fake news" in 2016 has marked the start of the disinformation debate, but, by now, falsehood, in general, is so prevalent that it does not require a heuristic cue to trigger uncertainty in news users. Another possibility is that while "fake news" is frequently used in European discourses (Authors), this debate might not be *as* salient and politicized as the U.S. discourse. Thus, while research shows that U.S. citizens have formed strong mental associations of "fake new" with opposing news brands (Van der Linden et al., 2020), Austrian citizens may simply not have these associations activated by the phrase. Third, it could also be that the term is so strongly associated with certain politicians that they have issue-ownership, so to speak, over "fake news" accusations.

Our study does not come without limitations which provides opportunities for future research. First, we only tested the effects of a one-time exposure to disinformation accusations. Our setting thus does not allow for statements about the duration of effects. Furthermore, studies should gather evidence on the effects of repeated exposure to disinformation accusations, considering that these are abundant in current political discourses (e.g., Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). Second, the experimental method always comes with a

reduction of complexity, which arguably reduces the ecological validity of our findings. For example, we could only use a limited number of messages on one topic (i.e., glyphosate in agriculture) and did not include a party cue which is somewhat unrealistic in natural settings. One could say that represents a limitation of our study. However, this manipulation enabled us to isolate the effects of disinformation accusations and prevent partisanship from influencing the outcomes. Of course, looking forward, further research is needed to understand whether disinformation accusations have different effects on issues that are more saliently connected to partisan divisions and identity. For example, studies could test the effects of topics that prevail in disinformation agendas such as immigration (Humprecht, 2019). A fruitful approach to specifically study the role of real-world politicians and partisanship in multi-party systems could be factorial surveys that make it possible to simultaneously manipulate various factors (e.g., Wallander, 2009). Studies using this design could even intertwine partisanship and populist attitudes. Furthermore, experimental research could be complemented with studies using observational data, in which we see how disinformation accusations by politicians play out in reality.

So far, research on the effects of disinformation accusations has provided inconclusive evidence, is limited to media perceptions in the specific case of the U.S, and has neglected the question of how crucial the word “fake news” indeed is for these effects. This article contributes to this line of research by showing that these accusations affect how citizens perceive the media in general, specific outlets, and the information provided by these and that populist attitudes are an essential factor for some of these outcomes. Notably, our results suggest that the specific phrase “fake news” is not necessarily the decisive factor behind these effects. Lastly, we provide initial evidence that disinformation accusations also have consequences in countries that, compared to the U.S., have higher levels of media trust, are less politically polarized, and have a less fragmented media environment (Humprecht, et al., 2020).

In sum, this study shows that the strategic instrumentalization of the threat represented by disinformation can be damaging to deliberative democracy. When a large part of society does not trust authoritative information sources and politicians' outright denial of factual information is tolerated, "a shared understanding of reality which forms the basis of sound democratic debate" (Van Dalen, 2019, p. 14) is in peril.

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[1] For transparency, we want to clarify that we pose a research question instead of hypotheses for this set of dependent variables, as this part of our study was pre-registered as exploratory analysis, and we did not formulate hypotheses at the point of pre-registration.

[2] We also manipulated the gender of the politician. However, following the pre-registration plan, we analyze the gendered difference of the impact of disinformation accusations on candidate evaluations in another paper. Therefore, the male and female conditions are in this study taken together, for both experimental conditions and the control group. In all analyses, we control for the gender of the politician.

[3] https://osf.io/u5sdx/?view_only=7378c8424b374a22b0c4369082bd0f3b; This pre-registration contains two parts, which relate to different research projects. This manuscript refers to **Part 1 of the pre-registration**.
Data Availability Statement: the data underlying this study will be made available in a repository.
The wording differs slightly from the here presented hypotheses, however, the expectations remain the same. We want to highlight that we pre-registered a number of hypotheses regarding the role of emotions in the effects of disinformation accusations. Our analyses showed that emotions do not serve as a mediator in these effects, as was hypothesized. These analyses are presented in Appendix A.2. Furthermore, we pre-registered two hypotheses regarding the effects of disinformation accusations on willingness to read the accused news stories. Our analyses showed that there are no effects of our manipulations on participants' willingness to read the news articles. These analyses are also presented in Appendix A.1.

[4] Using G*power we calculated the sample size needed to identify small effects ($f^2 = 0.02$). The analysis showed that a sample of 791 respondents provides a power of 0.80 to detect such effects given $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed). The panel agency oversampled around 50% so that the final sample was N = 1330. To check whether respondents are attentive, we included an instructional manipulation check (IPM) (Kung et al. 2018). In this item, respondents had to indicate in which elections they had participated. However, hidden in the lengthy description of the question, participants were instructed to ignore this question and enter "Vienna" in a textbox. Unfortunately, 58% of respondents failed the IPM. However, the answers indicated that respondents read and answered the question that followed the instruction text, and open-ended responses to the same question, indicating that many attentive participants failed the check. In addition, the manipulation checks show that, also for the sample that did include those participants that failed the IPM, manipulation was successful. As no other item in our survey included a long instruction, the IPM was arguably the wrong way to check for attention. We thus included all participants in our analyses. However, we repeated the analyses with the subsample of respondents that passed the IPM (N = 556) to check for robustness. The results largely remain the same, with some minor differences in significance that can be explained by the smaller sample size and lack of statistical power. These results are reported in Appendix A.3.

[5] The stimuli and a translation of the tweets can be found in Appendix D.

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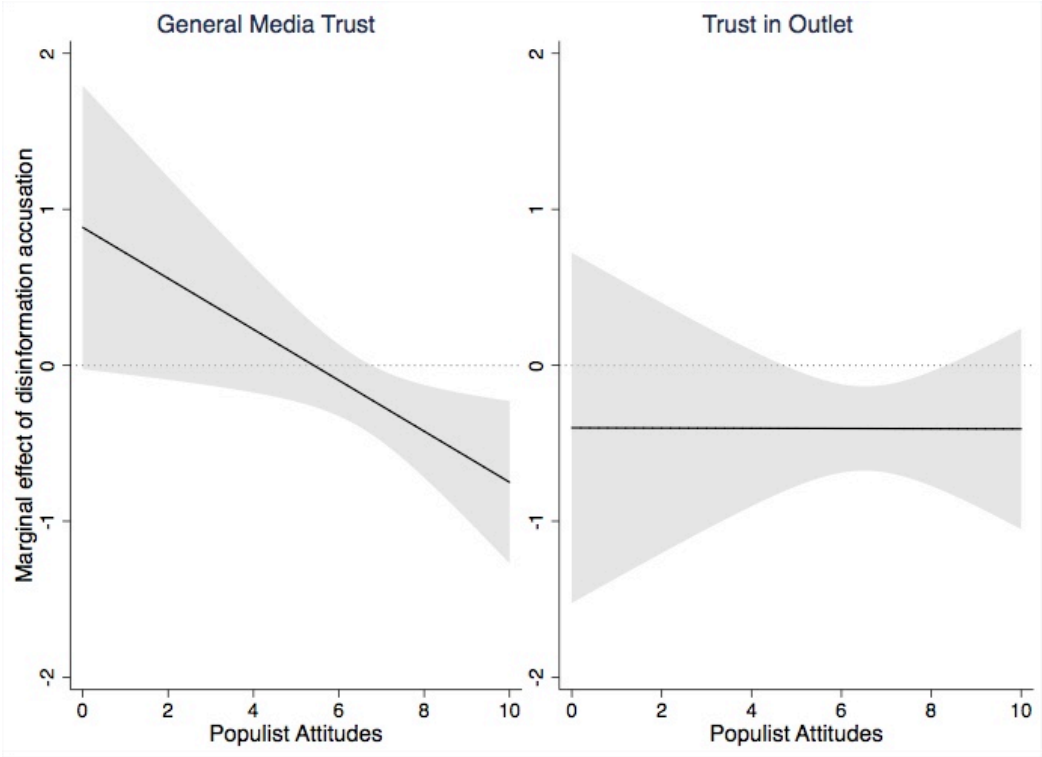

Figure 1. Average marginal effects of disinformation accusations on media trust for different levels of populist attitudes

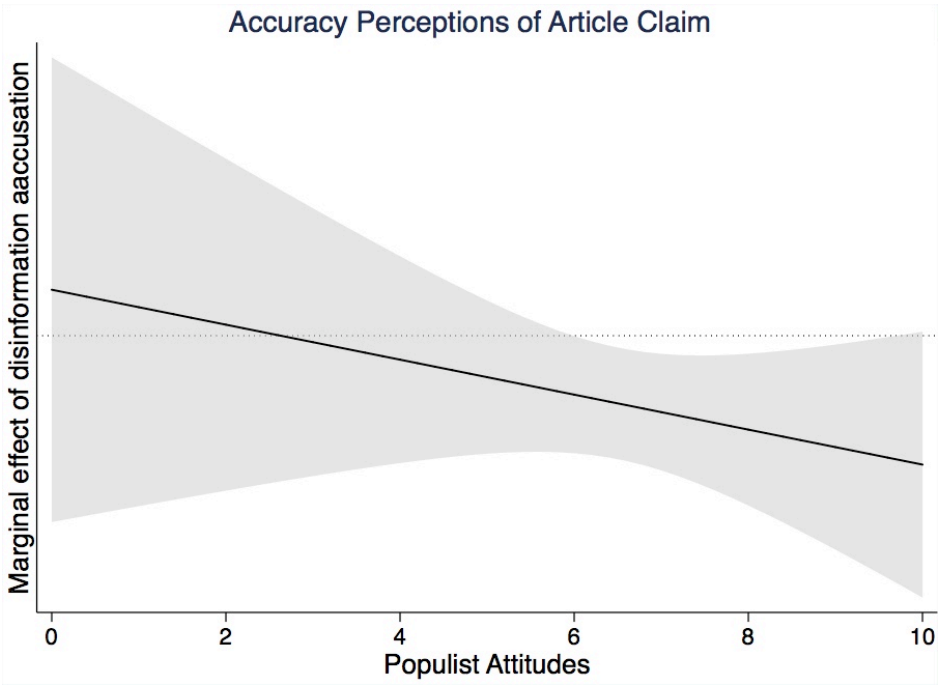

Figure 2. Average marginal effects of disinformation accusations on accuracy perceptions for different levels of populist attitudes

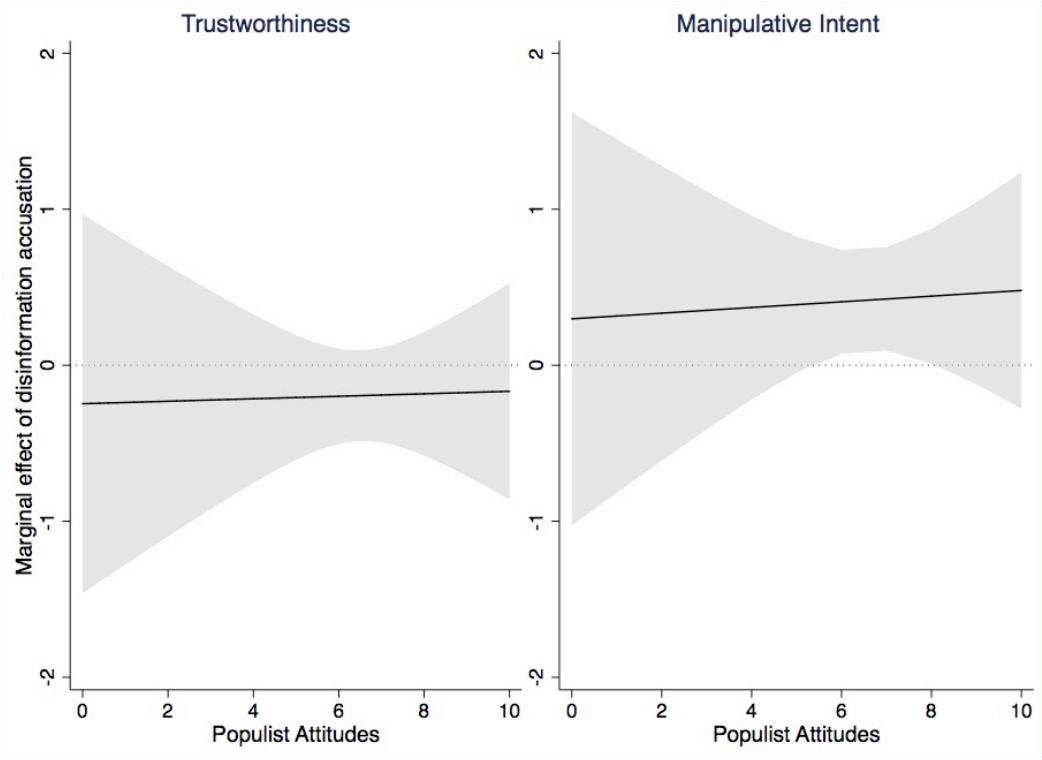

Figure 3. Average marginal effects of disinformation accusations on politician perceptions for different levels of populist attitudes

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting citizens' perceptions of news media, issues, and politicians

	Media Trust				Accuracy Perception		Politician Perceptions			
	General Media Trust		Trust in Outlet		"Glyphosate causes cancer"		Trustworthiness		Manipulative Intent	
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Disinformation accusation (vs. no accusation)	-.18 (.11)	.88† (.46)	-.41** (.14)	-.40 (.57)	-.33** (.14)	.22 (.57)	-0.20 (.15)	-.25 (.70)	.42* (.16)	.30 (.67)
Populist attitudes	-.10** (.03)	.02 (.06)	-.05 (.04)	-.05 (.07)	.26*** (.04)	.32*** (.07)	.19*** (.04)	0.19** (.08)	-.14** (.05)	-.16† (.08)
Populist attitudes* Disinformation accusation		-.16* (.07)		-.001 (.09)		-.09 (.09)		-.01 (.09)		.02 (.10)
Male politician	-.22† (.13)	-.23† (.13)	-.20 (.16)	-.20 (.16)	.05 (.16)	.05 (.16)	-.19 (.17)	-0.19 (0.17)	.17 (.18)	.17 (.19)
Female politician	-.29* (.13)	-.30* (.13)	-.51** (.16)	-.51** (.16)	.05 (.16)	.04 (.16)	.30† (.17)	0.30† (0.17)	-.33† (.19)	-.33† (.19)
Constant	5.93*** (.24)	5.21*** (.39)	5.75*** (.30)	5.75*** (.48)	5.78*** (.30)	5.41*** (.49)	2.94*** (.32)	2.97*** (.52)	5.98*** (.35)	6.06*** (.56)
Adjusted R^2	.01	.01	.01	.01	.03	.03	.02	.02	.02	.01

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001*, N = 1,330*

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting citizens' perceptions of news media, issues, and politicians - difference for inclusion vs. exclusion of "fake news"

	Media Trust				**Accuracy Perceptions**		**Politician Perceptions**			
	General Media Trust		**Trust in Outlet**		**"Glyphosate causes cancer"**		**Trustworthiness**		**Manipulative Intent**	
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Fake news mentioned (vs. no mention)	.14 (.13)	.16 (.53)	-.03 (.16)	.04 (.66)	-.27 (.16)	-.69 (.67)	.04 (.17)	.49 (.70)	.12 (.19)	-.33 (.77)
Populist attitudes	-.15*** (.04)	-.15* (.06)	-.05 (.05)	-.04 (.07)	.24*** (.05)	.20** (.07)	.20*** (.05)	.23** (.08)	-.14** (.06)	-.18* (.08)
Populist attitudes* Fake news mentioned (vs. no mention)		-.00 (.08)		-.01 (.10)		.07 (.10)		-.07 (.10)		.07 (.11)
Male politician	-.21 (.16)	-.21 (.16)	-.10 (.20)	-.10 (.20)	.25 (.20)	.24 (.20)	-.10 (.21)	-.10 (.21)	.08 (.23)	.07 (.23)
Female politician	-.36* (.16)	-.36* (.16)	-.48* (.20)	-.48* (.20)	.16 (.20)	.15 (.20)	.24 (.21)	.24 (.21)	-.22 (.23)	-.23 (.23)
Constant	6.03*** (.29)	6.02*** (.41)	5.31*** (.36)	5.27*** (.51)	5.65*** (.37)	5.89*** (.51)	2.69*** (.39)	2.44*** (.54)	6.30*** (.42)	6.55*** (.59)
Adjusted R^2	.02	.02	.004	.003	.03	.02	.02	.01	.01	.004

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, *N = 883*

IX. Overall Summary and Discussion

In 2016 “fake news” emerged as a politicized buzzword with a variety of meanings, subsuming fears of the influence of increasing disinformation, on the one hand, and growing political hostility towards mainstream news media, on the other hand. Although “fake news” quickly attracted scholarly attention, this literature was impeded by conceptual fuzziness. Moreover, most research focused on the prevalence and effects of actual disinformation (i.e., the fake news genre), overlooking a potent debate that has been sparked by the phrase and quickly was instrumentalized as a political strategy by (populist) political elites (i.e., the fake news label). In this context, this thesis set out to systematically explore *what fake news is (RQ1), how it is used (RQ2) and what its consequences are (RQ3).* As a cumulative thesis, four studies contribute to the scholarly knowledge of fake news, one conceptual paper, two content analyses of the usage of the phrase by journalists and politicians, and one experiment testing the effects of politicians’ usage of the fake news label. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on fake news as a whole, establishing the two-dimensionality of the phenomenon. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the understudied dimension of the fake news label. Taken together, the Chapters contribute to a better understanding of fake news by shifting attention to its political instrumentalization.

In this final chapter, I will first summarize the findings of each study and highlight how they answer the three research questions. Then I will discuss three overall contributions of this dissertation to political communication research, ending with a discussion of its limitations and the most fruitful pathways for future research.

1. Overview of Results and Contributions

1.1. Summary and Contributions of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, published in *Annals of the International Communication Association*) represents the theoretical foundation, which underlies this dissertation, by proposing the two-dimensional conceptualization of fake news as a genre of disinformation and fake news as a label to delegitimize journalism (*RQ1*). The article draws on initial empirical research on fake news and relevant research on related concepts, thoroughly embedding fake news within the extant literature on mis- and disinformation, rumors, conspiracy theories, propaganda and media criticism.

Based on this discussion, it argues that fake news is more than a buzzword or isolated case, and that instead both dimensions of fake news represent broader global trends in political communication. The fake news genre represents the general increase in disinformation in the online news environment, while the fake news label represents an increase in delegitimizing media criticism by political actors. Importantly, Chapter 5 highlights the power of the phrase itself and the debate it is eliciting. To help prevent the potentially dangerous consequences of this debate, the paper 1) offers an operational definition of the fake news genre to limit the use of the phrase for everything inaccurate, and 2) early on calls for shifting scholarly attention to studying the prevalence and consequences of politicians' increasing media attacks and disinformation attributions.

1.2. Summary and Contributions of Chapter 6

Having theoretically established that fake news should be considered a two-dimensional phenomenon and highlighted the buzzword-power of the phrase and the debate surrounding it, Chapter 6 (Egelhofer, Aaldering, Eberl, Galyga & Lecheler, 2020, published in *Journalism Studies)* set out to 1) understand how the fake news debate manifests in the news media and 2) to provide empirical evidence for the multi-dimensionality of fake news. Through quantitative manual content analysis of news stories that included a reference to fake news in major Austrian daily newspapers between 2015 and 2018, Chapter 6 illustrates the salience of the term in journalistic reporting. It furthermore shows the evolution of the journalistic coverage of fake news. Initially, the reporting on fake news focused on disinformation, but later it evolved into attacks on legacy media. These results offer empirical evidence for the distinction between the use of fake news for disinformation and as a political strategy to discredit news media.

Moreover, the article then points to a third altogether more dangerous type of reporting. The study shows that journalists often used the term in contexts completely unrelated to either disinformation or media attacks – to describe anything that is "false" (*RQ2*). Chapter 6 concludes that, in doing so, journalists arguably have contributed to a normalization and trivialization of a dangerous buzzword, and probably paved the way for a term that has since then been used against their own profession.

1.3. Summary and Contributions of Chapter 7

While the previous two chapters have established that fake news is indeed a two-dimensional phenomenon, Chapter 7 (Egelhofer, Aaldering, & Lecheler, 2021; published in *Journal of Language and Politics*) focuses on the understudied dimension of the fake news label. More

specifically, it analyzes how often and under which conditions politicians use the fake news label and delegitimizing media criticism. For this purpose, it first offers an operational definition of what forms of media criticism might be considered delegitimizing, i.e., criticism that is characterized by incivility or absence of reasoning. Through the means of a quantitative content analysis of media-related Facebook postings by Austrian and German politicians in 2017, the article shows that the presence of media criticism in general is rather limited, representing only 6.1% of all media-related postings including media critical statements. Moreover, less than half (41%) of these statements count as delegitimizing (i.e., 2.5% of all media-references) and the fake news label is hardly present.

However, when delegitimizing media criticism (and the fake news label specifically) occurs in politicians' social media communication, it is mostly used by populist politicians who use this strategy to accuse "the media in general" of being politically biased and reporting mis- and disinformation as well as fake news (*RQ2*). In sum, Chapter 7 shows that Austrian and German politicians also make use of delegitimizing media criticism; however, this is far less frequent than some political actors in other countries (e.g., Trump) (see Meeks, 2019). Moreover, it provides empirical evidence for the assumption that delegitimizing media criticism, disinformation accusations, and the fake news label specifically are tied together in populist communication strategies (e.g., Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018b)

1.4. Summary and Contributions of Chapter 8

Lastly, Chapter 8 (Egelhofer, Boyer, Aaldering & Lecheler, R&R in *Journal of Communication*) deals with the consequences of politicians' disinformation accusations and the fake news label in particular. Through the means of an online survey experiment with Austrian citizens, it investigates the effects of politicians' disinformation accusations on citizens trust in news media, the information provided by them, and the politicians who use these accusations.

Furthermore, it analyzes the moderating role of populist attitudes in these effects. Importantly, it tests whether the buzzword "fake news" indeed inhibits distinctive influence, i.e., whether it serves as a heuristic cue that leads to stronger effects than disinformation accusations without the phrase. The results show that disinformation accusations (with or without fake news) reduce citizens' trust in the in the accused news outlet as well as perceived accuracy of the specific news message that is criticized. Furthermore, while these accusations lead people to feel that the politicians want to manipulate them, they have no effect on the trustworthiness with which they perceive the politician. Importantly, only for populist citizens, these accusations also affect the degree to which they trust the media in general (*RQ3*). Lastly, the term "fake news" does not serve as a heuristic in these effects. That is, the effectiveness of disinformation accusations does not depend on the presence of the fake news label.

2. Overall Contributions

The overarching research questions of this dissertation ask what fake news is, how it is used and what its consequences are. In the section before, I have summarized how each study contributed to answering these questions. In this section, I will discuss the contribution of the combined chapters for political communication research. Specifically, I will highlight implications of my research for 1) the use of concepts in communication science, 2) the role of journalistic reporting for politicized debates, and 3) the study of political communication strategies.

2.1. Theoretical Clarification of Disinformation Narratives and Media Criticism

Conceptual confusion is relatively common in social science. Different scholars use many concepts inconsistently, and there is rarely a complete consensus about the definition of concepts (Gallie, 1956; Mudde, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017). While universal consensus might never be reached (Gallie, 1956), it is still essential to minimize conceptual inconsistencies as they can have negative consequences for social science and society: Conceptual confusion impedes the comparability and synthesis of scientific results and thereby hinders theory building and exhaustive explanations of social phenomena (Reinemann et al., 2017, see also Barbéra, 2020). Moreover, such confusion jeopardizes effective science communication, thus diminishing social science's contribution to society (Bale et al., 2011; Reinemann et al., 2017). Therefore, this dissertation contributes to the theoretical discourse in our field through alleviating conceptual confusion around the term "fake news". I do so in two ways. First, the work presented in this dissertation adds fake news as a distinct and new dimension to current understandings of the concept of disinformation. Second, I show that the fake news label represents a novel form of delegitimizing media criticism, thereby adding to a growing literature on media-elite relationships.

Disinformation is a Dynamic Concept

Detecting and curbing the spread of disinformation has been at the core of scientific research for a number of years. One of the biggest problems facing this research is that disinformation is dynamic, i.e., it is changing its form and modes of dissemination, becoming ever more "realistic" (e.g., HLEG, 2018, p. 31; Shu et al., 2020). The emergence of fake news is proof of this flux of disinformation.

Chapter IX

As with many phenomena in political communication, there has been much controversy about whether fake news is a useful concept and worth integrating into the political communication literature in the long term (e.g., Habgood-Coote, 2019). Conceptualizing a phenomenon entails identifying specific characteristics that distinguish it from other phenomena (Fallis, 2015; Goertz, 2012). I argue that fake news *does* have substantive conceptual value (see also Tandoc, 2019; 2021) because it has one important characteristic that sets it apart from other forms of disinformation: its *(pseudo-)journalistic format.* Therefore, fake news is a *novel specific form* of disinformation.

Chapter 5 provides three characteristics that define the fake news genre. As with other forms of disinformation, fake news is information that is *low in facticity* and is produced and/or disseminated with an *intention to deceive.* Importantly, however, it is also presented in a *journalistic format*. I argue that a message or narrative has to meet all three characteristics to identify as fake news, i.e., it is a non-compensatory concept (see also Wuttke et al., 2020 for a similar discussion on populism).

As I have outlined in Section 2.1.1 of the Theoretical Framework and in Chapter 5, this new form of disinformation has emerged from a desire to exploit the credibility of the journalistic format (e.g., Tandoc, 2019; 2021), thereby increasing its deceptiveness and "shareability". As a consequence, the fake news genre creates a heightened level of uncertainty within the public because it destabilizes existing habits among news users about how to recognize journalistic content vis-à-vis other narratives by visual heuristics (e.g., assuming that something that "looks like" a news website actually is based on journalistic work; e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). In doing so, the fake news genre *passively undermines* journalistic legitimacy.

This dissertation highlights that disinformation is a dynamic concept by identifying the fake news genre as one stage of its ongoing professionalization of creation and distribution. The next

step in this professionalization process seems to be in the direction of audiovisual disinformation (Dobber et al., 2021; Hameleers, Powell et al, 2020).

A New Form of Delegitimizing Media Criticism

The second theoretical contribution relates to the increasing concern about growing hostility in politicians' media criticism (e.g., Carlson, 2017; 2018) and the effects thereof (Reporters without Borders, 2017). Generally, it is nothing new that politicians voice negative judgments about the press (e.g., Watts et al, 1999; Ladd, 2012). Moreover, criticism is not bad per se; in fact, it is vital to democracies (Schudson, 2018), and particularly needed to ensure meaningful media performance (Cheruiyot, 2019; Wyatt, 2007). However, some forms of media criticism, such as blanket attacks against journalism as a profession, deviate from the usual allegations of politicians and need to be distinguished from criticism that fulfills democratic functions.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that the emergence of fake news (and disinformation) not only changes the level of facticity of information in public discourse, but also allows politicians to instrumentalize "fake news" as a label to express their media criticism. Prominently introduced by former US President Donald Trump, this use of the fake news label has spread around the world ever since (e.g., The New York Times, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). I argue that the fake news label is *actively undermining* journalistic legitimacy. Therefore, this dissertation makes a distinction between forms of *actual* disinformation (i.e., the fake news genre) and *accusations* of disinformation (i.e., the fake news label).

Moreover, I explore such accusations as part of a specific form of media criticism that differs from other types of political media criticisms, such as bias accusations, which have a long tradition in political rhetoric (e.g., Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010). When politicians accuse the news media of bias, they imply that news coverage is unfair towards their ideology, party, or person (for example in terms of visibility, issue agenda, or tonality; Eberl et al., 2017), which

does not necessarily imply that it is incorrect. However, fake news accusations are expressing that media coverage is not only incorrect, but *deliberately* deceiving and manipulating. This is why I classify disinformation accusations such as the fake news label as *delegitimizing media criticism* (Chapter 5 and 7). Chapter 7 provides an operationalizable definition of this idea, explaining that media criticism (i.e., a negative evaluation of journalistic products or sources, or the profession as a whole) is characterized by either *incivility* or *lack of argumentation.*[1] [2]

That is, it is a compensatory concept, where one characteristic is sufficient to identify an instance of media criticism as delegitimizing. The definition of "delegitimizing" distinguishes the fake news label from "good" or healthy media criticism. It clarifies that this type of criticism does not entail an evaluation to bring about positive change in journalism (Wyatt, 2007). Instead, its goal is to withdraw journalism's authority as a credible information provider completely. Functioning democracy *requires* criticism because it recognizes human fallibility, so that no one is given unrestrained power (Schudson, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to protect criticism as a democratic tool, separating criticism that aims to delegitimize journalism from that which aims to hold it accountable and check power in democracy.

In sum, this dissertation contributes to conceptual clarity in communication science by a) distinguishing the concept *fake news genre* from disinformation in general, b) distinguishing between *actual* disinformation (fake news genre) and *accusations* of disinformation (fake news label), and c) differentiating between media criticism and *delegitimizing* media criticism.

[1] As mentioned before, this dissertation is using deliberative democratic theory as the normative background. Other views of democracy (as discussed in Strömbäck, 2005) might include different criteria of what counts as "good" and "bad" in political discourse (Althaus, 2012, see also Freelon, 2015).

[2] As explained in Chapter 5 and 7, accusations of disinformation or "fake news" fall in that category because they are in essence lying accusations. Such lying accusations are inherently uncivil (Coe et al., 2014) as they undermine respect for the other party and thereby impair deliberative communication (Kenski et al., 2018). What is more, fake news accusations are rarely accompanied by substantive arguments or directed at specific news items, but are aimed at general (legacy) media organizations or the institution of journalism as a whole.

2.2. The Weaponization of Fake News

While worries about "a global wave of backsliding" might be exaggerated, in recent years, several (especially populist) political actors have been using authoritarian political strategies to subvert democratic systems in developing and even established democracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 167). The rejection of election outcomes and the encouragement of violence are two examples of these strategies (ibid., pp. 24-25), both of which have been employed by Donald Trump (Surzhko Harned & Jimenez, 2020). Another key strategy to weaken democracy is to verbally attack the news media (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 65; see also Crawford, 2006; Farhall et al., 2019; Solis & Sagarzazu, 2019). Politicians have used this strategy to influence media actors, i.e., to get them to change the tonality (Paniewsky, 2021) or issue agenda (Wodak, 2021, p. 25-26) of their media coverage or even to engage in self-censorship (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 72; Stern & Hassid, 2012). However, I explore how this strategy is used to influence *audience* perceptions of media. Specifically, I show that the weaponization of the fake news label as political strategy is effectively employed by (mostly populist) politicians to undermine media trust: When citizens are persuaded that news media do not act as a trustworthy source of information required for their democratic decision-making, it endangers meaningful political participation and might even render restrictions of media freedom more acceptable.

Reframing Fake News as a Problem Rooted in Journalism

As discussed in Section 2.1. of the Theoretical Framework, frames in political language can activate mental/conceptual frames and thereby affect subsequent thinking, attitude formation, and behavior (e.g., Lakoff, 2009; 2014). Mental frames get stronger with repetition. Thus, politicians often strategically employ specific language frames, or *reframe* certain issues, to elicit certain cognitive or behavioral reactions (Lakoff, 2014). This dissertation argues that

Trump (and fellow politicians) have effectively reframed the problem of disinformation as a threat *caused by* media actors.

As stated before, uncertainty and fears about untrue information in political information environments have been present for some time. Before the rise of the phrase "fake news" in political discussions, there was a variety of other specific words to discuss these falsehoods. For example, there has been concern about journalistic mistakes or so-called "canards" or "hoaxes" (McNair, 2018), "propaganda" by state-owned media outlets (Khaldarova, & Pantti, 2016), "native advertising" in news media (Carlson, 2015), and rising "misinformation" in online platforms (World Economic Forum, 2013) that may masquerade as news. Thus, beliefs that available information, occasionally provided in a journalistic format, might be inaccurate or even deliberately deceptive have been unconsciously present. "Fake news" is a simple yet ambiguous phrase with a "vessel-like capacity to absorb" (Wright, 2021a, p. 642) all these fears about various types of falsehood. By strategically and repeatedly using "fake news" and related disinformation accusations towards news media, politicians weaponized the general uncertainty about misinformation and reframed it as a problem caused by (mainstream) journalism (see also Neo, 2020). This strategy fits the logic of populist communication, which often entails blame strategies that provide simple cause-reaction logics that simplify complex social issues (see Section 1.2.2 of the Theoretical Framework). Similarly, using the fake news label reduces the complexity of mis- and disinformation and provides a simple, easy understandable cause: the media. The empirical research in this dissertation (Chapter 6 and 7) shows that this strategy is indeed used by politicians and provides further empirical evidence of affinity between the notion of post-truth and populism (Hameleers, 2020; Waisbord, 2018).

The Benefits of the Fake News Label Strategy

Politicians employ strategies with certain benefits in mind. The overarching goal of verbally attacking the media is to undermine democratic systems. However, there might be

more specific objectives that politicians are pursuing. Specifically, my research in Chapter 7 and 8 suggests that politicians use the fake news label in at least three ways to undermine audience perceptions of news media: 1) *delegitimizing journalism as whole,* 2) *undermining public confidence in specific outlets,* and 3) *decreasing audience belief in specific news narratives or stories.*

Importantly, verbally attacking the media is particularly attractive for politicians because – in comparison to other strategies such as restricting access to press conferences, censoring, or closing down news outlets – they can use it "without losing the ability to plausibly *deny* that these actions violate freedom of the press" (Solis & Sagarzazu, 2020, p. 6). My research indicates that they also do not have to fear adverse backfire effects on how the audience perceives them (Chapter 8). Thus, the weaponization of the fake news label as part of delegitimizing media criticism might be a particularly relevant strategy for politicians who seek to undermine democracy in countries with established or developing democratic systems, where more direct attacks would be met with resistance. For populist politicians, this strategy might entail an additional benefit: Through delegitimizing the (mainstream) media, populists can distinguish themselves from the establishment, which makes them attractive to their voters (Engesser et al., 2017; Van Dalen, 2019).

This dissertation has shifted attention from the content and spread of disinformation to the weaponization of the notion of fake news as part of a political strategy to erode democratic systems. Specifically, this strategy can be used to restrict freedom of the press and speech. In some countries, such as in Russia and Kenya, the reframing of the media as root for the spread of disinformation has already led to restrictions of press freedom. There, the introduction of so-called "fake news laws" allows for journalists to be punished in the form of fines and even jail time (Gatright, 2018; van Sant, 2019). In the countries studied in this dissertation, which represent stable democracies that are relatively resilient when it comes to deceptive information (Humprecht et al., 2020), this is not the case yet. However, even in these stable contexts, these

strategies can entail harmful consequences for democracy. They can be used to effectively undermine factual media narratives and decrease trust in media outlets (see Chapter 8), thereby hampering the media's provision of the trusted information that citizens need to make informed political decisions (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Furthermore, when citizens do not trust the media, it is easier for politicians to ignore criticism from journalists, making it difficult for the press to hold politicians accountable (e.g., Van Dalen, 2019). Lastly, the fake news label decreases general media trust for citizens with populist views (Chapter 8), which can contribute to an ongoing polarization of media attitudes by populist attitudes (Mittchell et al., 2018). Further decreasing media trust might drive populist citizens to alternative or hyper-partisan news outlets (Stier et al., 2020). A broad segment of the population not trusting the mainstream media runs counter to a shared understanding of reality, which is the basis for a vigorous democratic debate (see also Van Dalen, 2019; p. 19; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, p. 65) state when discussing democratic breakdown, "The process often begins with words".

2.3. Normalizing the Fake News Label when Talking about News Media

"The careless use of political language is currently on the rise and often this carelessness serves political purposes" (Ranan, 2020a, p. 13).

In democracies, today, many scholars worry that political views once considered extreme and norm-breaking are now being "normalized," that is, they are becoming part of the mainstream (Ekström et al., 2020; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2015; Wodak et al., 2021). Most research in this context focuses on how far-right populist agendas feed into mainstream politics (e.g.,

Ekström et al., 2020; Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2015; Wodak et al., 2021). However, importantly for this dissertation, normalization refers *not only* to what is being discussed, but also *how.* In other words, normalization refers to changes in what counts as normal *language*, i.e., the limits of what is "acceptable to say" in political discourse are expanding as incivility and untruths become increasingly common (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak, 2019; Wodak, 2021; Wodak et al., 2021). Politicians' verbal attacks on the press are certainly one example of this trend (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 164; Zelitzer 2018), as described in 2.2.

However, my research indicates that journalists actually assist in the normalization of "fake news" as a common expression by using the term frequently. Because of the work of journalists, in other words, fake news accusations receive a larger audience. Since citizens have a limited capacity to cope with frequent violations of shared norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 164 referring to Moynihan, 1993), repeated exposure to norm-breaking language leads them to shift their standards. In that way, news coverage that uncritically echoes politicians' "taboo" language contributes to it becoming accepted by the public. This means that journalists themselves normalize blanket defamations of news media, which are dangerous as they decrease the perceived value of media in democratic systems. Furthermore, this normalization might lead to other (currently) abnormal behavior towards the press – such as censorship, attacks, or even physical violence – becoming more acceptable (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

This dissertation provides empirical evidence detangling journalists' unique role in contributing to the normalization of "fake news" as an acceptable way to talk about media. Specifically, Chapter 6 demonstrates that journalists use "fake news" ambiguously and frequently, thereby contributing to its ubiquity in public discourse. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the proposed amplifier effect of news coverage on the fake news genre (Bennett & Livingston, Tsfati et al., 2020) might also apply to the fake news label (see also Lawrence & Moon, 2021 for similar findings in the US). As Chapter 6 shows, there were two instances in which politicians have used the fake news label against news media in Austria, but these

received intense media coverage. This finding aligns with existing research showing that Australian politicians rarely use fake news accusations, but when they do, they are amplified by journalists (Farhall et al., 2019). Moreover, the fact that journalists sometimes use the fake news label themselves to discredit news media (Chapter 6) makes their part in the normalization process exceedingly evident. This extends research showing that journalists normalized politicians' disinformation accusations by using them sarcastically against themselves (such as German "lying press" accusations; Denner & Peter, 2017) or describing them ironically as a "badge of honor" (such as *The New York Times* when covering Trump's fake news accusations; Lischka, 2019).

That is not to say that journalists should not use the phrase "fake news" in their reporting, nor that they should not report on delegitimizing media criticism. Indeed, it is not surprising that they cover fake news accusations, as these are newsworthy (as discussed in Section 2.3 of the Theoretical Framework). Furthermore, due to shortened news cycles, journalists often incorporate unchanged content from other sources (e.g., social media, press agencies), which might be using the phrase (e.g., Reich & Godler, 2014). It might also be the case that journalists use the fake news label themselves because they expect the audience to classify the term correctly (Denner & Peters, 2017). Rather, I argue that when journalists report on these accusations, it is essential that they also substantively *react* to them and thus contextualize them. First, as these accusations are often inaccurate (i.e., directed at factual reporting), journalists need to correct them, thereby holding politicians accountable to the truth-telling norm in democratic political debate (Graves & Wells, 2019). Second, as politicians attempt to delegitimize journalism with the fake news label, a clear defensive stance against these verbal attacks is required (see also Carlson, 2020; Denner & Peter, 2017; Lischka, 2019). However, by simply repeating critical elite rhetoric, they trivialize it and strengthen the association of fake news with their profession. Even negating the accusations strengthens them (for example, Richard Nixon's explaining that he is "not a crook" during the Watergate scandal

simply strengthened the public's perception of him being a crook; Lakoff, 2014, p. 19; see also Schwarz, 2015). Instead, when covering these accusations, journalists could explain the strategy that stands behind the weaponization of fake news. Furthermore, they may need to remain open to (legitimizing) media criticism and, if appropriate, practice self-criticism (Carlson, 2020). At the same time, however, they need to defend their legitimacy by clearly articulating the democratic and social values of journalism (Carlson, 2018; Denner & Peter, 2017; Lischka, 2019). As Carlson (2018, p. 8) puts it, "If journalism would not speak for itself, others will continue to do so."

As stated above, the normalization of fake news accusations can have severe consequences. Specifically, experimental evidence suggests that *news reports* about fake news accusations can decrease media trust for some citizens (Guess et al., 2017). Thus, by amplifying these verbal attacks, journalists might lead to this strategy affecting more citizens. Second, when disinformation accusations become the "normal" media criticism, it might hinder the democratic functions of criticism. As journalists tend to ignore uncivil forms of criticism (Cheruiyot, 2018) or take them lightly (Denner & Peter, 2017; Lischka, 2019), this criticism cannot hold journalists accountable or improve their performance. Third, if the fake news label (and other delegitimizing expressions) become the standard way of talking about the media, it may become more challenging for journalists to maintain their authoritative position in democratic societies (see also Denner & Peter, 2017, p. 293; Van Dalen, 2019, p. 14). Another possible consequence could be that society further lowers the standards of appropriate behavior towards the press. What *could* follow is that other (currently) abnormal practices towards the press, such as restrictions of press freedom, or trivializing violence, are next to enter the normalization process (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 164-165).

3. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

In this final section, I discuss some of the limitations of this dissertation and outline relevant avenues for future research. Of course, each study in this cumulative dissertation has its specific limitations, which are discussed in the respective chapters. Here, I want to focus on the overarching points of discussion and highlight four particularly fruitful areas that emerge from the limits of my own research, and in which future studies can extend what is presented here.

First, the empirical findings reported in this dissertation cannot be generalized beyond the Western European context. Studying Germany and Austria provides a much-needed addition to the primarily US-based research on fake news. By showing that the weaponization and normalization of fake news do take place in these "stable" contexts (Humprecht et al., 2020) and have some of the expected (albeit moderate) effects on citizens, this dissertation has provided important, although worrisome, knowledge about the scope of the problem. However, based on my results, I cannot make assumptions about the magnitude of these concepts in other national settings, especially those with lower media trust, less press freedom, and higher polarization (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2021; Humprecht et al., 2020). Therefore, replicating my findings in other political and cultural contexts is crucial. More importantly, comparative research investigating countries that vary in their democratic stability is needed to make conclusive statements about the scope and effects of the weaponization and normalization of fake news. This comparative research also needs to take into account similar verbal strategies in other languages (such as studies on the German "lying press" accusations, e.g., Denner & Peter, 2017). Considering the Western bias of political communication research (Van Aelst et al., 2017), studies that investigate Eastern European, African, Asian, and South American contexts are needed (see, e.g., Neo, 2020). Focusing especially on countries with unconsolidated democratic or authoritarian systems could be relevant in this context, as press

freedom is often weaker and the role of journalists less stable, making the weaponization of disinformation and fake news likely to have a bigger impact – for example, when it is used as an excuse for censorship (Neo, 2020; Reporters without Borders, 2017). Future research could also examine in a comparative manner what the effects are of these attacks on journalists, relating both to their well-being and their performance (e.g., Paniewsky, 2021).

Second, the data collected in this dissertation focus on a very specific time frame, i.e., the years 2016 to 2020. While this helped capture the emergence of the fake news debate, the time frame, of course, overlaps with the US presidency of Donald Trump, who coined the fake news label in international discourse. Therefore, the question arises whether the end of his term also heralded the end of the fake news label. However, in 2021 political leaders around the world continue using the phrase, for example in Poland (AP News, 2021), Israel (Winer & Staff, 2021), and the Netherlands (Meijeer, 2021), suggesting that the label lives on. Furthermore, while I focused on the term "fake news", this dissertation represents a case study for a more general trend: the instrumentalization of the threat of disinformation as a strategy to avoid answering to criticism, delegitimize journalism, and create uncertainty about the authenticity and truthfulness of available political information. That is, even if "fake news" loses significance in political discourse, its meaning – the doubt of authenticity – seems to remain a central stylistic device in political communication. In other words, the accusation of "fakeness" seems to stick. For example, the labels "fake science" (BBC, 2019), or "fake polls" (Ellefson, 2021), have already been employed in political discourse. Furthermore, in social media conversations, accusation of being a social bot, meaning not an *authentic person*, are used to discredit messages (Friedberg & Donovan, 2019). Future studies should investigate the further development of this discreditation strategy and how it extends to other buzzwords and to citizens' communication. Moreover, research that investigates the consequences of this (evolving) strategy should also take into account the longevity of the effects on citizens and whether repeated exposure strengthens them.

A third limitation of this dissertation relates to my argument that the fake news label is a political strategy, which implies that political actors use it *intentionally* to pursue certain *goals*. However, I do not investigate whether politicians indeed use it intentionally or what their possible goals are. Thus, there is no absolute certainty that politicians do not use such accusations because they actually believe that (some) media spread falsehoods which they want to rectify. Therefore, I see a crucial need for studies that tackle the complicated question of how to determine intentionality. A possibility would be to conduct reconstructive interviews with politicians who have used these accusations. Also, surveys with politicians or their advisors, investigating how much they value truth as a norm for conversations (Grice, 1975) or how important they find it to actively silence those with whom they disagree (Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018), could help us understand better how deliberate these accusations are. Another way to approach intentionality could be to focus on linguistic characteristics. As there are indications that *actual* disinformation differs structurally from correct information (Damstra et al., 2021), future research could investigate whether the same holds true for accusations of disinformation.

Turning to the goals underlying this strategy, I have suggested that politicians use it to undermine citizens' perceptions in news media. Additional possible objectives could be to *foster general uncertainty* about what information sources to trust or to initiate people to also *reject information as fake* when it does not fit their (political) beliefs. Moreover, accusations can be intended to affect media actors, for example *to influence the news agenda:* Politicians might use them strategically to attract news coverage and to push other unpopular issues from the agenda (e.g., Wodak, 2021). Furthermore, by targeting certain outlets, they might intend to curb critical news coverage. For example, evidence from Israel suggests that journalists who have been verbally attacked by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu changed their reporting, sometimes even applying a "strategic bias" to it, intentionally leaning more to the right to avoid accusations of leftwing bias (Paniewsky, 2021). Similarly, some journalists might

even react with self-censorship, not reporting on certain policies and politicians at all (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Future research is needed to identify the goals that politicians pursue with this strategy and to understand the scope of its consequences.

Lastly, there are some limitations to the proposed conceptualization of fake news that could be further explored in future research. First, I argue that the fake news genre has conceptual value because it exploits the journalistic format and thereby might be more persuasive and indirectly undermines public confidence in journalism. However, I do not empirically test this statement. Experimental research should investigate whether disinformation presented in a pseudo-journalistic manner leads to stronger misperceptions than disinformation in different formats does and how it affects perceptions of journalism. Furthermore, the conceptualization of fake news leaves room for theory development. That is, I propose a classic definition of the fake news genre as text-based disinformation. However, disinformation is constantly evolving and professionalizing, and scholarship needs to take into account the affordances of a fast-changing media landscape, especially the rise of visual and audio-visual disinformation, such as deepfakes, which seem to be even more deceptive (Dobber et al., 2021; Hameleers, Powell et al, 2020). Future research also needs to consider how the concept of the fake news label might evolve. I already alluded to some variations of "fake" accusations above. However, it is also possible that changes to the format of actual disinformation would lead to changes in the accusations of disinformation as well. It could be, for example, that the phrase "deepfake" becomes a label to discredit audio-visual media content. In other words, I view my research as one small step in a long line of future studies dealing with the weaponization of disinformation concepts for political purposes.

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APPENDIX CHAPTER 6

Appendix A:
Additional Information on Sampled Newspapers

Newspaper	Initial release	Circulation (in %)[1]	Online reach (in %)[2]
Der Standard	1988	2015: 5,4 2016: 5,3 2017: 6,5 2018: 7,8	2015: 30,6 2016: 32,4 2017: 36,7 2018: 34,7
Die Presse	1946	2015: 4,0 2016: 4,0 2017: 4,2 2018: 4,6	2015: 19,2 2016: 21,6 2017: 23,9 2018: 12,9
Heute	2004	2015: 12,9 2016: 13,3 2017: 12,6 2018: 11,6	2015: 16,5 2016: 23,1 2017: 21,2 2018: 24,4
Kleine Zeitung	1904	2015: 11,5 2016: 11,6 2017: 10,5 2018: 9,8	2015: 18,0 2016: 15,0 2017: 20,7 2018: 27,2
Kronen Zeitung	1900	2015: 32,0 2016: 30,5 2017: 29,2 2018: 27,2	2015: 32,3 2016: 33,8 2017: 36,3 2018: 38,3
Kurier	1954	2015: 8,3 2016: 7,6 2017: 7,3 2018: 7,4	2015: 21,2 2016: 22,3 2017: 28,0 2018: 26,5
Österreich	2006	2015: 8,4 2016: 7,8 2017: 7,0 2018: 6,9	2015: n/a 2016: 22,4 2017: 27,7 2018: 23,5
Salzburger Nachrichten	1945	2015: 3,2 2016: 3,4 2017: 3,5 2018: 3,4	2015: 10,8 2016: 10,3 2017: 10,1 2018: 12,7

Appendix A Table 1. Additional information on sampled newspapers

[1] Retrieved from: Media Analyse (2015-2018): media-analyse.at
[2] Based on the last quarter of the year; retrieved from: oewa.at

Appendix B: Codebook

Note: Explanation of the variable coding and examples are excluded from this appendix, but were included in the codebook. The full codebook (in German) is available upon request.

Coders coded: the title, the first paragraph and all paragraphs in which "Fake News" appears.

Variable 1: Fake news genre
Is the article discussing fake news as genre of disinformation?

0 no
1 yes

Variable 2: Fake news label
Is the article discussing or using fake news as label to discredit information?

0 no
1 yes

Note:
In the following, the codebook is divided in two parts: If genre and label are discussed in an article, both parts are also coded. If only one occurs, only that part (1 or 2) will be coded.

Part 1: Fake news genre

Variable 3a: Actor spreading fake news

0 no
1 yes

Variable 3b: Actor spreading fake news (specific)

Open text coding of actor.

Variable 4a: Actor featured in fake news

0 no
1 yes

Variable 4b: Actor featured in fake news (specific)

Open text coding of actor.

Variable 5a: Definition

0 no
1 yes

Explanation:

Is fake news defined (i.e., is somewhat additional information for the term fake news given)?

Variable 5b: False information

Is fake news defined as consisting of false information?

0 no
1 yes

Variable 5c: Intentionality

0 no
1 yes

Variable 5d: Journalistic design

0 no
1 yes

Variable 6 Actors responsible for counteracting

Does the article discuss one of the following group of actors that are seen as responsible for counteracting?

Variable 6a: Political actors: Politicians, parties, political institutions (e.g., EU, UN)

0 no
1 yes

Variable 6b: Social media actors: Companies such as Facebook, Twitter

0 no
1 yes

Variable 6c: Fact-checking organizations: such as Snopes, politifact, factcheck.org, Mimikama (Austria), ARD-Faktencheck (Germany)

0 no
1 yes

Variable 6d: Citizens (in the context of media literacy)

0 no
1 yes

Variable 6f: Journalistic actors

0 no
1 yes

Part 2: Fake news label

Variable 7a: Actor using the fake news label

0 no
1 yes

Variable 7b: Actor using the fake news label (specific)

Open text coding of actor.

Variable 8a: Actor being discredited by the fake news label

0 no
1 yes

Variable 8b: Actor being discredited by the fake news label (specific)

Open text coding of actor.

Appendix C: Reliability Scores

Variable	Percent Agreement	Krippendorff's α	Brennan and Prediger's κ	Scott's Pi
Fake news in context disinformation	0.92	0.83	0.87	0.83
Fake news in context of discrediting information	0.90	0.81	0.85	0.81
Actors reported to be spreading fake news disinformation	0.89	0.52	0.89	0.75
Actors reported to be featured in fake news disinformation	0.94	0.74	0.94	0.81
Actors reported to using the fake news label against media	0.91	0.84	0.91	0.83
Actors reported to have been discredited by the fake news label	0.89	0.70	0.88	0.70
Fake news defined as false information	0.87	0.80	0.81	0.80
Fake news defined with synonyms for news	0.86	0.77	0.78	0.77
Fake news defined as created intentionally	0.86	0.77	0.79	0.77
Political actors mentioned in the context of counteracting the spread of fake news	0.89	0.82	0.84	0.82
Social media actors mentioned in the context of counteracting the spread of fake news	0.90	0.82	0.84	0.82
Fact-checking mentioned in the context of counteracting the spread of fake news	0.91	0.82	0.86	0.82
Journalism mentioned in the context of counteracting the spread of fake news	0.88	0.82	0.79	0.79
Media literacy mentioned in the context of counteracting the spread of fake news	0.89	0.79	0.83	0.79

Appendix C Table 1. Reliability coefficients

Appendix D: Additional analyses

In the following, the results of the analyses only including print articles are presented (online coverage is excluded). We present Table 1 and Figures 1 – 7 from the manuscript. The interpretation remains largely the same as in the manuscript. However, in some case, online coverage of fake news starts earlier compared to print coverage.

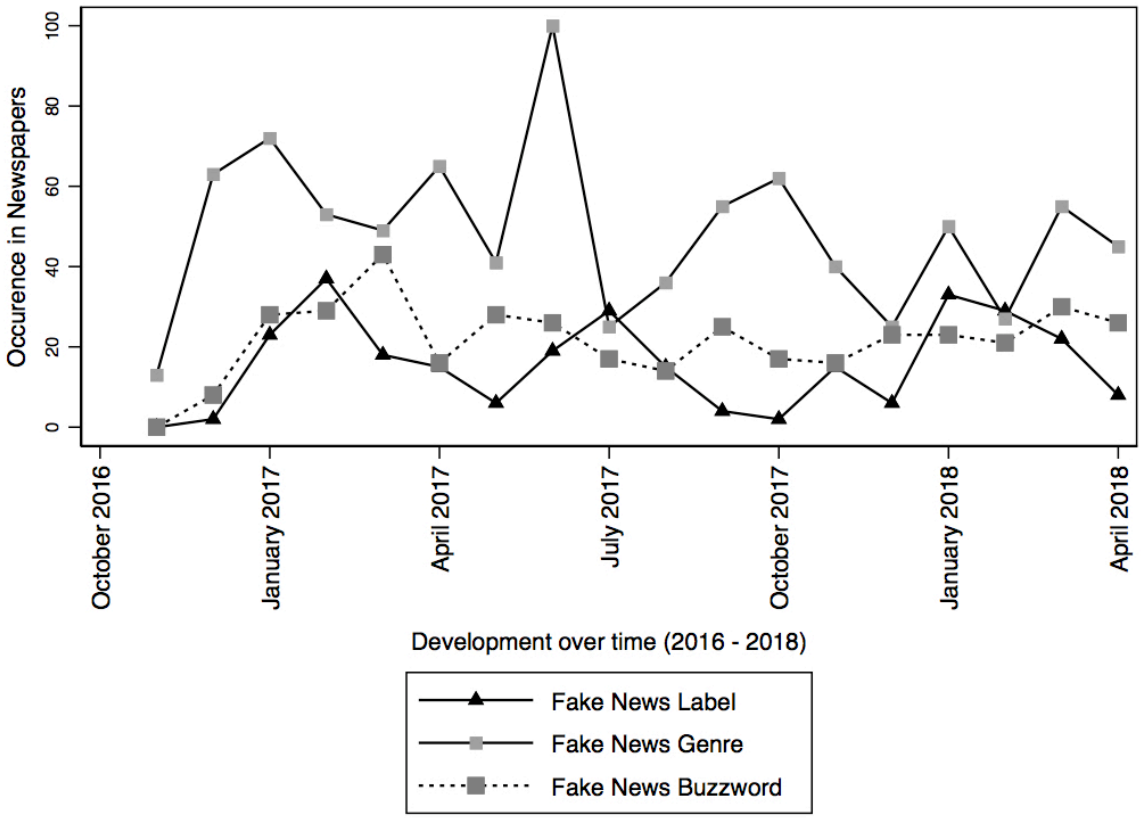
N = 1,511

Distribution of articles on the three fake news concepts:

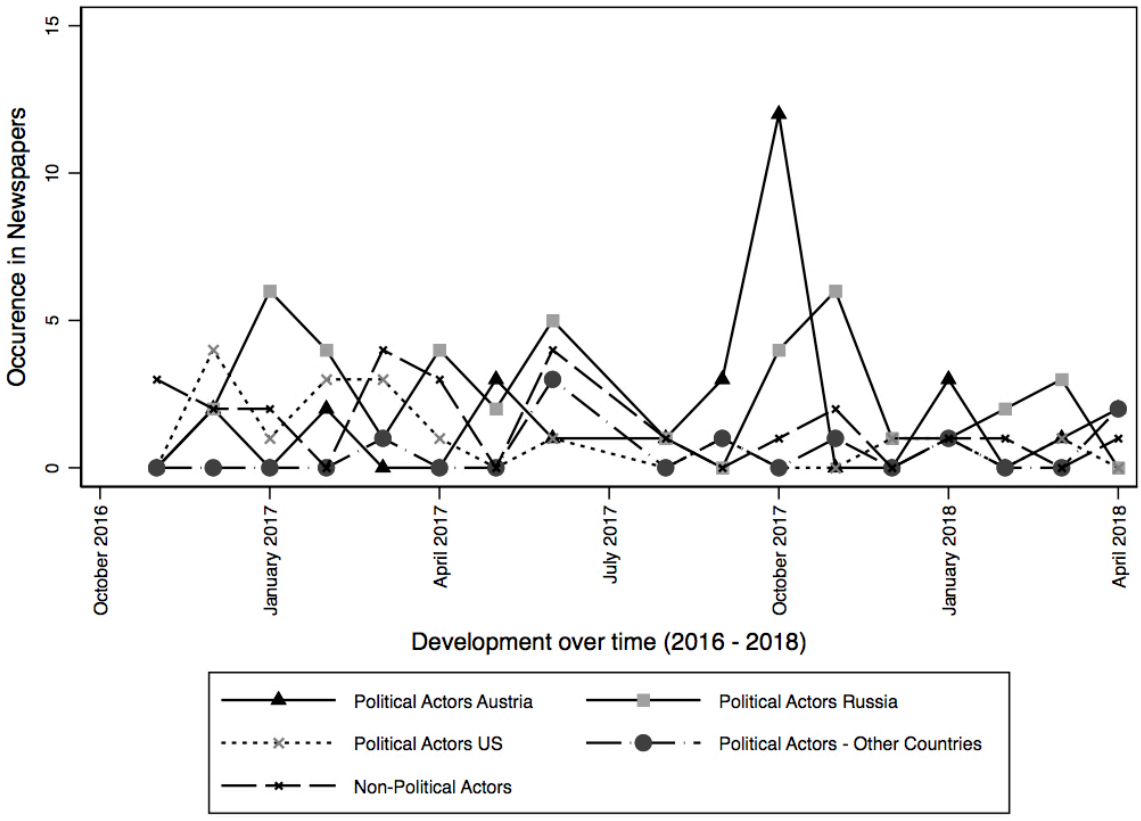
Fake News Genre: 876
Fake News Label: 284
Fake News Buzzword: 390

	genre	**label**	**buzzword**
Mention in title	18,5 % (162)	8,5% (24)	11,3% (44)
1 mention in text	65% (569)	70,4% (200)	79% (308)
2-4 mentions in text	29,8% (261)	25,7% (73)	19,8% (77)
5 or more mentions in text	5,3%(46)	3,9% (11)	1,3% (5)
All	(876)	(284)	(390)

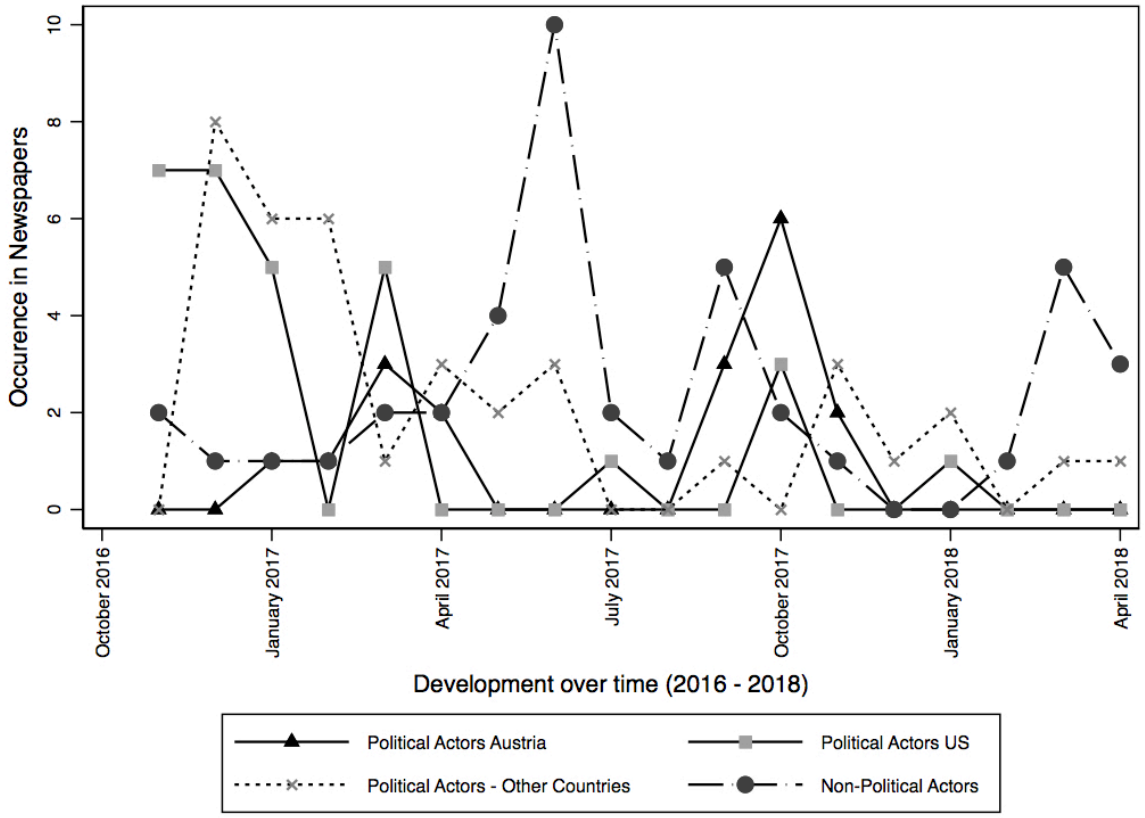
Appendix D Table 1. Number of "fake news" mentions in title and text body



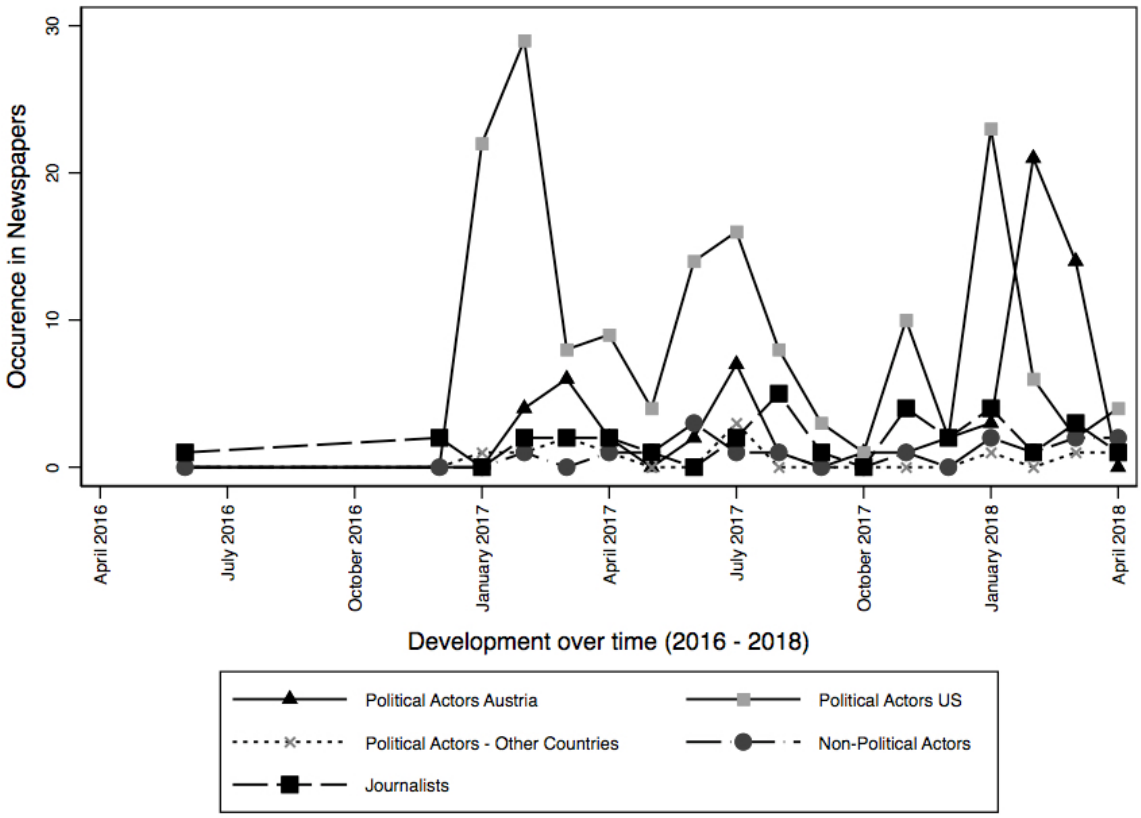
Appendix D Figure 1. Articles on the three fake news concepts over time



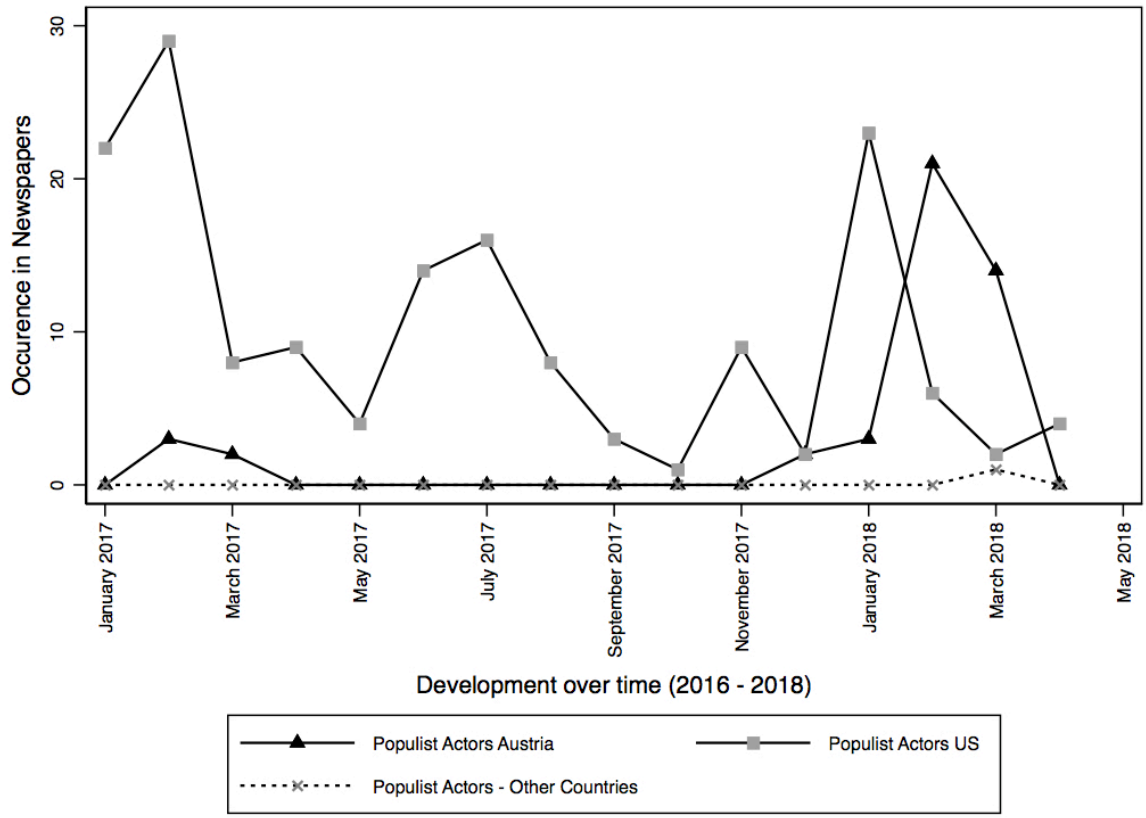
Appendix D Figure 2. Actors spreading fake news



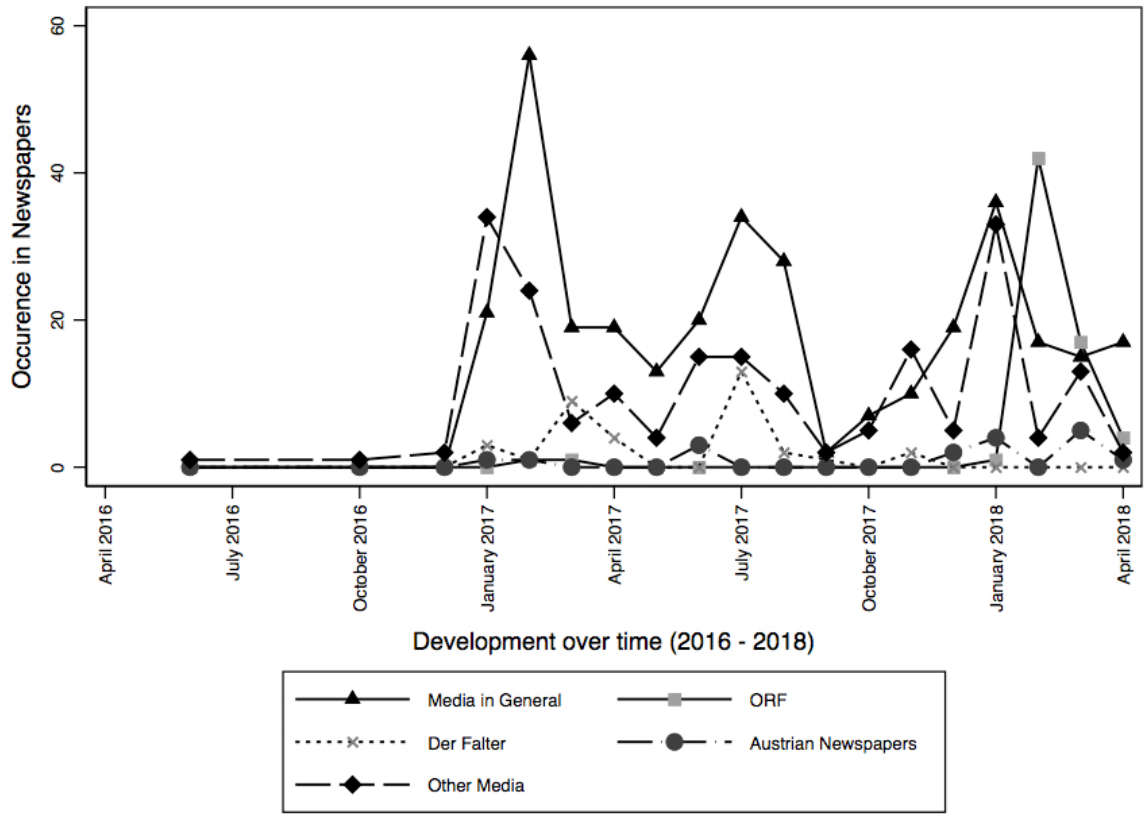
Appendix D Figure 3. Actors featured in fake news stories



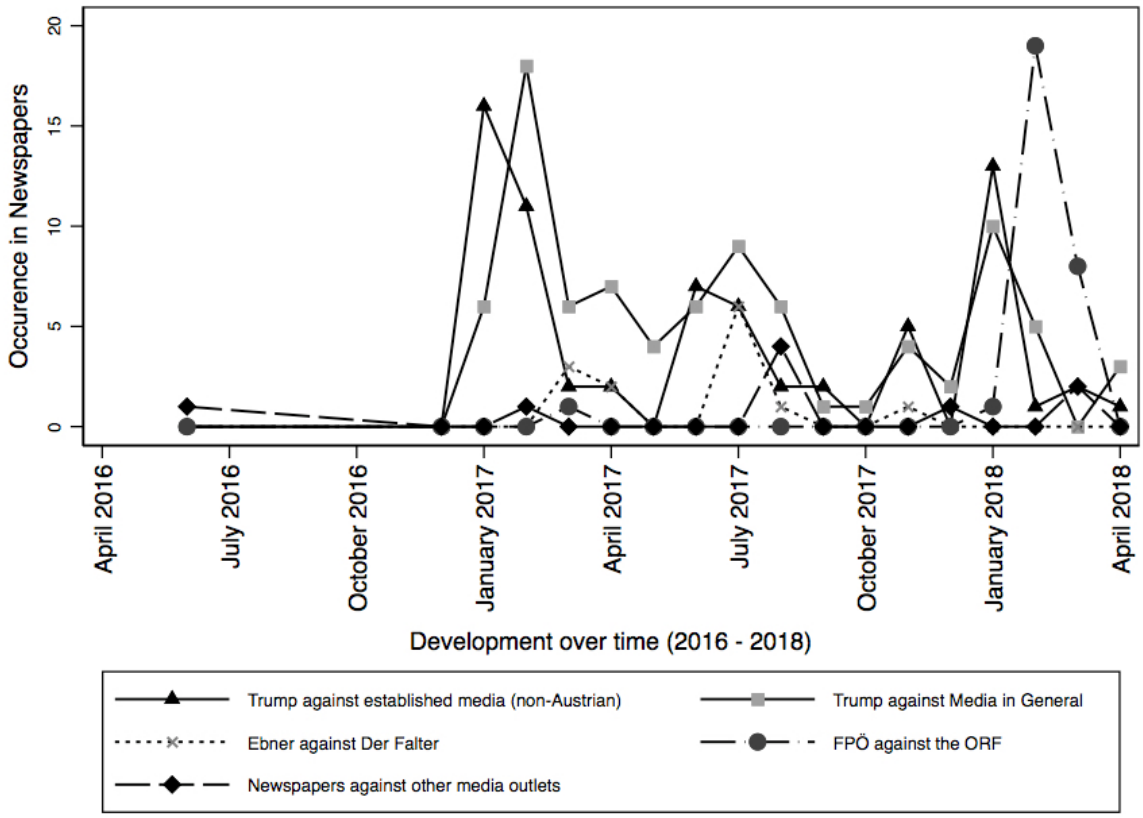
Appendix D Figure 4. Actors using the fake news label



Appendix D Figure 5. Populist actors using the fake news label



Appendix D Figure 6. Actors being discredited with the fake news label



Appendix D Figure 7. Most reported actor combinations for the fake news label

APPENDIX CHAPTER 7

APPENDIX A: Analyzed Actors

Actor	Country	Number of postings
ÖVP (Österreichsche Volkspaertei)	AUT	193
Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP)	AUT	87
SPÖ (Sozialdemokartische Partei Österreich)	AUT	136
Christian Kern (SPÖ)	AUT	187
FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich)	AUT	164
Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ)	AUT	261
Die Grünen	AUT	133
Ulrike Lunacek (Die Grünen)	AUT	96
NEOS	AUT	142
Matthias Strolz (NEOS)	AUT	167
Liste Pilz	AUT	99
Peter Pilz (Liste Pilz)	AUT	50
CDU	GER	99
Angela Merkel (CDU)	GER	20
SPD	GER	44
Martin Schulz (SPD)	GER	34
CSU	GER	85
Horst Seehofer (CSU)	GER	3
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	GER	36
Cem Özdemir (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)	GER	81
Katrin Göring-Eckardt (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)	GER	72
DIE LINKE	GER	35
Sarah Wagenknecht (DIE LINKE)	GER	66
Dietmar Bartsch (DIE LINKE)	GER	133
FDP	GER	39
Christian Lindner (FDP)	GER	238
AfD (Alternative für Deutschland)	GER	301
Alice Weidel (AfD)	GER	195
Alexander Gauland (AfD)	GER	1
Total		3,197

Table 1. Analyzed Political Actors

APPENDIX B: Searchstring

Terms related to media / journalism	Terms related to criticism	Austrian News Outlets/ Formats	Austrian Journalists	German News Outlets/ Formats	German Journalists	Inter-national News Outlets
medi*	fake news	standard	wolf	zeit	seibert	le monde
zeitung*	system-presse	oe24	klenk	welt	yücel	le figaro
presse*	system-medien	heute österreich	thurnher	neues deutschland	will	nyt
boulevard*	lügenpresse	krone*	wadsak	sz	überall	chicago tribune
magazin*	zwangs-gebühr*	unzens-uriert*	wrabetz	faz	relotius	daily mirror
journalis*	rotfunk	zur zeit	kotynek	tages-spiegel	tolu	guardian
bericht*	pinocchio	die aula	novak	spiegel	kleber	daily telegraph
nachricht*	presse	info-direkt	patterer	bild	slomka	independent
radio*	staatsmedi*	wochenblick	salomon	express	illner	nzz
tv*	wahrheits-verdreher	andreas-unterberger*	brandstätter	handelsblatt	hayali	landbote
fernseh*	volksver*	mosaik-blog	perterer	die welt	aust	daily mail
sendung*	krise*	kontrast.at	dichand	kompakt	augstein	ouest
news	vertrauens*	orf*	fellner	b.z.	lorenzo	le parisien
wochen*t	staatsfunk	puls 4	schima	taz	röbel	sun
kurier	fälsch*	prosieben	cmilborn	bayernkurier	diekman	npr
tagesblatt	lüge*	atv*	el-gawhary	berliner morgenbost	koch	srf
morgen*	fehlinfo*	servus tv	lorenz	ard / das erste	brinkbäumer	sf
merkur	erfind*	sat 1	settele	zdf	plasberg	bbc
anzeiger	manipul*	kabel eins	misik	3sat	jreichelt	cnn
rundschau	hetze*	ö1 ö2 ö3	rafreider	arte	strunz	fox
tagblatt	auskoch*	oe1 oe2 oe3	thür	rtl / rtl ii / super rtl	horn	al jazeera
tageblatt	unwahr*	krone hit	föderl-schmid	prosieben	jakobs	cnbc
kreis-anzeiger	gelogen	zeit im bild	herbst	kabel eins	afhüppe	msnbc
allgemeine	unkorrekt*	zib*	zielina	wdr	klusmann	breitbart
kreisblatt	verlogen*	atvplus*	blumenau	ndr	kister	infowars
rundfunk	erfunden*	im zentrum	fleischhacker	br	krach	rt russia
journal	gefälscht*	hangar 7	koller	ntv	löwisch	today
gez	propagand*	60 minuten	bornemann	sat 1	poschardt	epoch times
gis	verschwör*	politik	mayer	sixx	hassel	netzplanet
talk show	politisch	report	horaczek	tele 5	seymour	kopp
talkshow	motiviert*	welt journal	ortner	vox	mikich	rebel media
studio	einseitig*	konkret	stajić	mdr	frey	wideshut
post	parteiisch*	pro und contra	löw	comedy central	bellut	the thruthseeker
times	fehldar-stellung*	willkommen österreich	leitner	phoenix	rakers	conversation
	emotionalis*	die tagespresse	wadsak	swr	hofer	gbrexit
	kritik*		kotanko	deutschland funk	daubner	another angry voice
	fehler*		mohr	antenne*	riewa	the canary
	post-truth		renner	1 live	schröder	westmonster
	post-fact		schüller	energy	zervakis	the daily caller
	alternative fact*		jungwirth		miosga	occupy democrats
			kogelnik		buhrow	
			sterkl		zamperoni	
			narodos-lawsky		sandra maischberger	
			malle		atalay	
			thalhammer		gerster	

			bischofberger stribl reisinger schmitt neuhold fidler hahn kramar-schmid jilch mayr jungnikl-gossy kocina langer votzi	heute tagesschau tagesthemen hart aber fair monitor politbarometer heuteshow schulz und böhmermann neo magazin royale tagespresse der postillon extra 3 die anstalt	hahlweg sievers kloeppel meuser maihoff wallraff	

APPENDIX C: Codebook

Shortened version of codebook, translated from German:

Attention: Does the post mention media or journalists in any way? If not: **irrelevant**

Media in general ("the media"), journalists in general, specific media outlets (e.g., Der Kurier) or specific journalists can be addressed.

2 cases:

If two different media/journalists are discussed, the codebook is coded for each media actor (first media actor A, then media actor B). If more than two media actors are discussed, the two media/actors **first mentioned in the posting text** are coded.

V1 Addressed Journalistic Actor

Coding: open text entry

Attention:

- As a medium it does not count: Press releases (from political parties, companies) Party communication (Youtube channels, websites, e.g. spd.de; Bayernkurier (CSU) or FPÖ TV are not coded as media). However, party media count as (alternative) media (e.g. unzensuriert.at is coded).
- If "News" or "Message" is used without direct reference to media/journalism, but rather synonymous with "Information" (and no other media actors occur), the posting is irrelevant.

V2 Context of references to the media

V2a: *Own* appearance in journalistic coverage

0 no

1 yes

V2b: Appearance in journalistic coverage of *other* political actors

0 no

1 yes

V2c: Media criticism

0 no

1 yes

V2d: Positive evaluation of journalistic performance/media coverage

0 no

1 yes

V2e: Emphasizing the democratic relevance of journalism

0 no

1 yes

V2f: Demand for abolition or reform of broadcasting fees

0 no

1 yes, reformation

2 yes, abolition

V3 Issues addressed in media criticism

Is one of the following reasons for the criticism explicitly given in the posting? Attention: Only encode if "media criticism" was coded!

V3a Partisan bias accusation:

Is mentioned that parties/ politicians/ ideologies are represented unjustly/ unsuitably/ inadequately?

0 no

1 yes

V3b Non-partisan bias accusation:

Is mentioned that non-partisan issues, actors are presented unjustly/ inadequately/ inadequately?

0 no

1 yes

V3c Quality of journalistic coverage

Is journalistic practice/routines/quality of coverage criticized? Accusations can include topics such as tabloidization, emotionalization, scandalization or softening of journalistic coverage, and game-framing.

0 no

1 yes

V3d Attribution of falsehood

Is it stated that there is a factual inaccuracy?

0 no

1 yes

V3e Accusation that falsehood is intentional

The political actor has to explicitly state that the accused falsehood has been distributed *intentionally* (Attention: refers to "3d Attribution of falsehood" - code only if 3d is coded)

0 no

1 yes

V3f Fake News accusation

Does the political actor accuse one or more journalistic actors of disseminating/ producing fake news? If the term "fake news" is used to describe disinformation that is not provided by a journalistic actor, it does **not** count as fake news accusation.

Coding:

0 no

1 yes

V4 Argumentation (Attention: Only encode if "media criticism" was coded!)

Is there any argument for the accusation given?

Coding:

0 no

1 yes

V5 Incivility: Does the posting contain Incivility (addressed to media actors)?

Incivility includes insulting language, name-calling, belittling, character assasination vulgar or obscene language, as well as allegations of lies.

Coding:

0 no

1 yes

APPENDIX D: Intercoder Reliability

Variable	Percent Agreement	Brennan and Prediger's κ	Krippendorff's α
Addressed journalistic actor	0.93	0.93	0.92
Context of references to the media:			
Own appearance in journalistic coverage	0.96	0.92	0.91
Appearance in journalistic coverage of other political actors	0.92	0.85	0.76
Media criticism	0.97	0.95	0.92
Positive evaluation of media coverage	0.93	0.87	0.82
Emphasizing the democratic relevance of journalism	0.99	0.99	0,90
Demand for abolition or reform of broadcasting fees	0.96	0.94	0.79
Issues addressed in media criticism:			
Partisan bias accusation	0.92	0.88	0.80
Non-partisan bias accusation	0.92	0.88	0.80
Quality of journalistic coverage	0.91	0.86	0.76
Attribution of falsehood	0.92	0.89	0.80
Accusation falsehood is intentional	0.90	0.82	0.58
Fake news label	0.79	0.68	0.58
Argumentation for criticism	0.93	0.90	0.81
Incivility	0.92	0.84	0.42

Table 1. Intercoder Reliability Scores

APPENDIX E: Main Analysis

Table 1. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of delegitimizing media criticism

Delegitimizing media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist actor	1.27** (.48)			1.34** (.49)	1.89* (.76)	1.21* (.53)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PSB & Quality		-1.86*** (.28)		-1.84*** (.28)	-1.40* (.65)	-1.85*** (.28)
Commercial & Tabloid		-3.19*** (.50)		-3.25*** (.50)	-3.16* (1.53)	-3.25*** (.51)
Alternative News		-2.05** (.60)		-2.04** (.60)	1.21 (.89)	-2.03** (.60)
Campaign period			.19 (.29)	.36 (.30)	.37 (.30)	.1 (.57)
Media type (reference category: media)* populist						
PSB & Quality * populist					-.56 (.72)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-.06 (1.61)	
Alternative News* populist					-4.20** (1.25)	
Populist* campaign time						.36 (.63)
Incumbent	-.35 (.68)	-1.06†(.61)	-.99 (.61)	-.40 (.69)	-.37 (.68)	-.42 (.69)
Left-right	.22* (.09)	.43*** (.09)	.41*** (.08)	.24** (.09)	.26** (.09)	.24** (.09)
Country (1 = German)	-1.09** (.37)	-1.16** (.37)	-.94* (.37)	-1.33*** (.38)	-1.40*** (.39)	-1.36*** (.39)
Total postings	-.01*** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01** (.00)
Total media references	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.00)
Month	-.08* (.03)	-.06 (.04)	-.09* (.04)	-.07† (.04)	-.07† (.04)	-.07† (.04)
Constant	-2.27** (.76)	-1.88** (.74)	-3.08*** (.72)	-1.22 (.77)	-1.44† (.85)	-1.05 (.81)
R^2 Cox-Snell	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.05
R^2 Nagelkerke	0.16	0.25	0.15	0.26	0.27	0.26
Penalized log likelihood	-296.76924	-268.37065	-299.4545	-262.42583	-257.45396	-261.7519

Note: The dependent variable is presence of delegitimizing media criticism (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; $N = 3{,}197$; [a]penalized logistic regression

Table 2. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of media criticism in general

Media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist	1.04*** (.25)			1.11*** (.27)	1.70*** (.44)	.94** (.29)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PSB & Quality		-2.35*** (.21)		-2.31*** (.21)	-1.85*** (.38)	-2.32*** (.21)
Commercial & Tabloid		-3.46*** (.33)		-3.51*** (.34)	-2.81*** (.72)	-3.52*** (.34)
Alternative News		-3.26*** (.53)		-3.30*** (.53)	-.40 (.74)	-3.29*** (.53)
Campaign period			-.13 (.19)	.003 (.20)	.01 (.21)	-.39 (.38)
Media type (reference category: media general)* populist actor						
PSB & Quality * populist					-.72 (.46)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-.95 (.80)	
Alternative News* populist					-3.71*** (1.02)	
Populist * campaign time						.56 (.43)
Incumbent	-.77† (.45)	-1.44** (.42)	-1.33** (.41)	-.91* (.45)	-.90* (.45)	-.92* (.45)
Left-right	.17** (.05)	.34*** (.05)	.30*** (.05)	.21*** (.06)	.22*** (.06)	.20*** (.06)
Country (1 = German)	-.31 (.24)	-.42† (.23)	-.15 (.23)	-.58* (.25)	-.59* (.25)	-.62* (.25)
Total postings	-.01*** (.00)	.004*** (.00)	-.004*** (.00)	-.004*** (.00)	-.004*** (.00)	-.004*** (.00)
Total media references	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)
Month	-.04 (.02)	-.01 (.03)	-.03 (.02)	-.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)
Constant	-2.26*** (.55)	-1.11** (.53)	-2.64*** (.52)	-.77 (.56)	-1.11† (.61)	-.57 (.59)
R^2 Cox-Snell	0.07	0.11	0.06	0.11	0.12	0.11
R^2 Nagelkerke	0.19	0.30	0.17	0.32	0.33	0.32
Penalized log likelihood	-595.63892	-519.85982	-603.43991	-508.47773	-502.42368	-506.72488

Note: The dependent variable is presence of media criticism in general (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; N = 3,197; [a]penalized logistic regression

APPENDIX F: Robustness Checks – Separated analyses for Austria and Germany

Table 1. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of delegitimizing media criticism – Austria

Delegitimizing media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist actor	3.60† (1.87)			3.48† (1.85)	4.05† (2.09)	3.55† (1.83)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PBS & Quality		-2.13*** (.44)		-2.04*** (.45)	-1.15 (.89)	-2.03*** (.45)
Commercial & Tabloid		-4.03*** (.75)		-4.00*** (.76)	-2.43 (1.63)	-3.99*** (.76)
Alternative News		-1.53† (.81)		-1.71* (.81)	2.04 (1.44)	-1.73* (.81)
Campaign period			-.76 (.54)	-.53 (.55)	-.57 (.56)	-.12 (.77)
Media type (reference category: media general)* populist						
PBS & Quality * populist					-1.29 (1.03)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-1.83 (1.80)	
Alternative News* populist					-4.66** (1.75)	
Populist* campaign time						-.62 (1.01)
Incumbent	1.73 (1.29)	.14 (.74)	.14 (.74)	1.69 (1.28)	1.51 (1.21)	1.67 (1.26)
Left-right	.11 (.32)	.86*** (.22)	.84*** (.22)	.18 (.31)	.38 (.38)	.18 (.31)
Total postings	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01** (.00)
Total media references	.01* (.01)	.01* (.01)	.01* (.01)	.01† (.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Month	-.15** (.05)	-.08 (.05)	-.11* (.05)	-.05 (.05)	-.05 (.05)	-.06 (.05)
Constant	-.43(1.45)	-2.33** (.89)	-3.01*** (.83)	.46 (1.47)	-.58 (1.63)	.25 (1.5)
R^2 Cox-Snell	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.06
R^2 Nagelkerke	0.23	0.36	0.23	0.38	0.40	0.38
Penalized log likelihood	-123.99628	-103.69116	-123.93238	-100.77212	-98.704229	-100.54913

Note: The dependent variable is presence of delegitimizing media criticism (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; $N = 1{,}715$; [a]penalized logistic regression

Table 2. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of delegitimizing media criticism – Germany

Delegitimizing media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist actor	.64 (.51)			.59 (.52)	1.05 (.97)	.35 (.61)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PBS & Quality		-1.61*** (.36)		-1.66***(.36)	-1.26 (.97)	-1.68*** (.37)
Commercial & Tabloid		-2.05** (.62)		-2.11** (.62)	-1.48 (1.66)	-2.12** (.63)
Alternative News		-2.29* (.88)		-2.30** (.88)	.71 (1.22)	-2.30** (.89)
Campaign period			.69† (.36)	.83* (.37)	.82* (.38)	.45 (.83)
Media type (reference category: media general)* populist						
PBS & Quality * populist					.48 (1.05)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-.60 (1.77)	
Alternative News* populist					-4.16* (1.91)	
Populist* campaign time						.47 (.89)
Incumbent	-2.16 (1.57)	-2.35 (1.57)	-2.38 (1.58)	-2.24 (1.55)	-2.12 (1.56)	-2.21 (1.55)
Left-right	.24* (.10)	.30** (.11)	.31** (.10)	.25* (.10)	.26* (.10)	.25* (.10)
Total postings	-.002 (.00)	-.003 (.00)	-.003 (.00)	-.002 (.00)	-.002 (.00)	-.002 (.00)
Total media references	.001 (.01)	.004 (.01)	.003 (.01)	003 (.01)	.002 (.01)	.003 (.01)
Month	-.004 (.05)	-.01 (.05)	-.04 (.06)	-.06 (.06)	-.06 (.05)	-.05 (.06)
Constant	-4.62*** (1.19)	-2.79* (1.25)	-4.21** (1.24)	-3.02* (1.24)	-3.38* (1.45)	-2.88* (1.25)
R^2 Cox-Snell	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.045
R^2 Nagelkerke	0.13	0.20	0.14	0.22	0.23	0.220
Penalized log likelihood	-151.55622	-140.45851	-150.24899	-135.69412	-134.15886	-135.34059

Note: The dependent variable is presence of delegitimizing media criticism (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; N = 1,482; [a]penalized logistic regression

Table 3. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of media criticism in general – Austria

Media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist	2.55*** (.98)			2.59** (.97)	3.87** (1.24)	2.65** (.98)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PBS & Quality		-2.37*** (.36)		-2.32*** (.37)	-1.71** (.55)	-2.32*** (.37)
Commercial & Tabloid		-3.92*** (.51)		-3.93*** (.52)	-2.39** (.81)	-3.93*** (.52)
Alternative News		-2.43** (.76)		-2.65** (.77)	-.02 (1.02)	-2.67** (.77)
Campaign period			-.44 (.34)	-.31 (.35)	-.34 (.36)	-.17 (.48)
Media type (reference category: media general)* populist actor						
PBS & Quality * populist					-1.42† (.83)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-2.52** (1.09)	
Alternative News* populist					-3.92** (1.46)	
Populist * campaign time						-.24 (.65)
Incumbent	.70 (.65)	-.30 (.47)	-.30 (.46)	.71 (.65)	.63 (.64)	.71 (.65)
Left-right	.04 (.18)	.54*** (.12)	.48*** (.11)	.10 (.18)	.12 (.18)	.10 (.18)
Total postings	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)
Total media references	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01** (.00)	.01* (.00)	.01* (.01)	.01* (.00)
Month	-.09** (.03)	-.02 (.04)	-.07† (.04)	-.01 (.04)	-.00 (.04)	-.01 (.04)
Constant	-.18 (.86)	-.86 (.64)	-1.87** (.57)	1.05 (.91)	.49 (.94)	.96 (.93)
R^2 Cox-Snell	.05	.09	.05	.09	.04	.09
R^2 Nagelkerke	.19	.31	.18	.33	.17	.33
Penalized log likelihood	-230.99625	-198.29687	-233.16033	-192.44313	-188.40474	-191.92749

Note: The dependent variable is presence of delegitimizing media criticism (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; $N = 1{,}715$; [a]penalized logistic regression

Table 4. Penalized Logistic Regression Models predicting presence of media criticism in general – Germany

Media criticism	Model 1 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 2 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 3 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 4 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 5 Log odds (*SE*)	Model 6 [a] Log odds (*SE*)
Populist	1.14*** (.32)			1.13** (.34)	1.64** (.59)	.77* (.36)
Media type (reference category: media general)						
PBS & Quality		-2.28*** (.26)		-2.26*** (.27)	-1.71** (.58)	-2.29*** (.27)
Commercial & Tabloid		-2.88*** (.43)		-2.88***(.43)	-2.88† (1.50)	-2.92*** (.43)
Alternative News		-3.49*** (.69)		-3.50*** (.69)	-.48 (1.00)	-3.50*** (.69)
Campaign period			.01 (.24)	.16 (.25)	.15 (.26)	-1.01 (.72)
Media type (reference category: media general)* populist actor						
PBS & Quality * populist					-.70 (.65)	
Commercial & Tabloid * populist					-.04 (1.56)	
Alternative News* populist					-3.64** (1.32)	
Populist * campaign time						1.39† (.76)
Incumbent	-3.28* (1.45)	-3.79** (1.45)	-3.75** (1.44)	-3.38* (1.45)	-3.30* (1.45)	-3.35* (1.45)
Left-right	.22*** (.06)	.32*** (.07)	.31*** (.06)	.24*** (.06)	.25*** (.06)	.23*** (.06)
Total postings	.001 (.00)	-.002 (.00)	-.001 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Total media references	-.002 (.00)	.003 (.00)	.001 (.00)	.001 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	.001 (.00)
Month	.01 (.03)	-.002 (.03)	.001 (.03)	-.01 (.04)	-.01 (.04)	-.003 (.04)
Constant	-4.62*** (.66)	-1.94** (.64)	-3.81*** (.61)	-2.72*** (.69)	-3.16*** (.82)	-2.51*** (.69)
R^2 Cox-Snell	0.08	0.13	0.08	0.14	0.14	0.14
R^2 Nagelkerke	0.20	0.32	0.18	0.33	0.34	0.34
Penalized log likelihood	-333.77678	-292.50413	-340.4316	-283.76461	-281.24927	-281.21965

Note: The dependent variable is presence of delegitimizing media criticism (0 = no; 1 = yes). † $p<.1$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$; N = 1,482; [a]penalized logistic regression

APPENDIX CHAPTER 8

Appendix A: Deviation from Pre-Registration

A.1 Analyses of preregistered hypotheses regarding willingness to read

A.2 Analyses of preregistered hypotheses regarding the mediating role of emotions

A.3 Analyses of sample including only participants who passed instructional manipulation check

Appendix B: Wording of survey questions

Appendix C: Robustness Check Populist Attitudes

Appendix D: Stimulus Material and Translation

Appendix A: Deviation from Pre-registration

A.1 Analyses of preregistered hypotheses regarding Willingness to Read

Overview conditions:

- *Disinformation accusation*: disinformation accusation not mentioning the phrase "fake news"
- *Fake news accusation*: disinformation accusation mentioning the phrase "fake news"
- *Control condition*: no disinformation accusation

In the pre-registration, we included an expectation that *the effect of a disinformation accusation on the willingness to read the attacked newspaper article is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that a) higher populist attitudes result in a negative effect and b) lower populist attitudes result in no effect or a positive effect on the willingness to read the attacked newspaper article.* The measurement of willingness to read are presented in Appendix B.

To test this, we regressed willingness to read on the dummy variable for disinformation accusation (disinformation accusation & fake news accusation vs. control condition). Model 1 of Table A1.1 shows that there is no main effect of disinformation accusations on willingness to read (b = -.03, SE =.17, p = .87). Model 2 shows that the interaction effect between the disinformation accusation and populist attitudes on willingness to read is not significant either (b = .05, SE = .10, p = .63), which shows that disinformation accusations do not have an impact on willingness to read the accused newspaper article, irrespective of the strength of citizens' populist attitudes.

Furthermore, we investigated whether the

As seen in Table A.1.2, there are no main effects of the type of disinformation accusation on willingness to read (b = -.03, SE = .19, p = .86, model 1).

Moreover, the interaction effect of the type of disinformation accusation and populist attitudes was not significant for the willingness to read (b = -.07, SE = .12, p = .55, model 2).

Table A1.1 OLS regression models predicting willingness to read

	Willingness to Read	
	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2
Disinformation accusation (vs. no accusation)	-.03 (.17)	-.36 (.70)
Populist attitudes	.09† (.05)	.06 (.09)
Populist attitudes* Disinformation accusation		.05 (.10)
Male politician	-.29 (.19)	-.29 (.20)
Female politician	-.19 (.19)	-.19 (.19)
Constant	3.99*** (.36)	4.21*** (.59)
Adjusted R^2	.002	.001

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, *N = 1,330*

Table A.1.2. OLS regression models predicting willingness to read - difference for inclusion vs. exclusion of "fake news"

	Willingness to Read	
	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2
Fake news mentioned (vs. no mention)	-.03 (.19)	.43 (.79)
Populist attitudes	.11† (.06)	.15† (.09)
Populist attitudes* Fake news mentioned (vs. no mention)		-.07 (.12)
Male politician	-.08 (.24)	-.08 (.24)
Female politician	-.26 (.23)	-.26 (.24)
Constant	3.81*** (.43)	3.55*** (.61)
Adjusted R^2	.001	.001

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001*, N = 883*

A.2 Analyses of preregistered hypotheses regarding the mediating role of emotions

Overview conditions:

- *Disinformation accusation*: disinformation accusation not mentioning the phrase "fake news"
- *Fake news accusation*: disinformation accusation mentioning the phrase "fake news"
- *Control condition*: no disinformation accusation

Effects of disinformation accusations on media perceptions, mediated through anger

In the pre-registration, we included a number of hypotheses regarding the mediating role of emotions, for which we present the results below. The measurement of all relevant variables are presented in Appendix B.

First, we expected that the effects in H1a (*The impact of disinformation accusations on media trust/ willingness to read is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that stronger populist attitudes result in a negative effect and*) is mediated by anger towards the medium (mediation hypothesis 1). To test this, we ran a conditional indirect effects model in Hayes' PROCESS macro in SPSS, using 5.000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2017). We used the dummy variable for the disinformation accusation. (disinformation condition & fake news condition vs. control condition) as the independent variable, populist attitudes the moderator, anger towards the medium as the mediator, and general media trust, trust in the accused outlet, or willingness to read the article as dependent variable.

Contrary to our expectations, we did not find a significant indirect effect of the disinformation accusation on neither general media trust (see Table A2.1.1) or trust in the accused outlet (see Table A2.1.3), or on willingness to read (see Table A2.1.5). Similarly, we

did not find a significant indirect effect of the disinformation accusation on general media trust (see Table A2.1.2) or trust in the accused outlet (see Table A2.1.4), or on willingness to read (see Table A2.1.6).

Table A2.1: Mediation hypothesis 1

Table A2.1.1 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of fake news accusation on general media trust through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Fake News Accusation	-.33	(.74)
Populist Attitudes	.03	(.08)
Explicit Fake News Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.08	(.11)
Gender Politician	.20†	(.11)
Constant	3.57***	(.55)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	.03	(.02)
Fake News Accusation	-.13	(.13)
Gender	-.15*	(.08)
Constant	.18***	(.15)
Model indices	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at – 1 SE	.00	.01
Populist attitudes at M	.00	.01
Populist attitudes at + 1 SE	.01	.01
Index of moderated mediation	.00	.01

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N=927

Table A2.1.2 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of disinformation accusation on general media trust through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Disinformation Accusation	-.09	.79
Populist Attitudes	.04	.08
Disinformation Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.05	.12
Gender Politician	.13	.12
Constant	3.64***	.56
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**

Predictors		
Anger	.04†	.02
Disinformation Accusation	-.27*	(.13)
Gender	-.11	.08
Constant	5.08	(.15)
Model indices	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.01	.01
Populist attitudes at M	.01	. 01
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.01	.02
Index of moderated mediation	.00	.01

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p < .10; N = 850

Table A2.1.3 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of fake news accusation on trust in outlet through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Fake News Accusation	-.33	(.74)
Populist Attitudes	.08	(.11)
Fake News Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.03	(.08)
Gender Politician	.20†	(.11)
Constant	3.57***	(.55)
Dependent variable equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Anger	-.06†	(.02)
Fake News Accusation	-.27*	(.13)
Gender	-.16*	(.08)
Constant	5.52***	(.15)
Model indices	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.00	.02
Populist attitudes at M	-.01	.01
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.02	.02
Index of moderated mediation	-.01	.01

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N=927

Table A2.1.4 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of disinformation accusation on trust in outlet through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Disinformation Accusation	-.09	(.79)
Populist Attitudes	.04	(.08)

Disinformation Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.05	(.12)
Gender Politician	.13	(.12)
Constant	3.64***	(.56)
Dependent variable equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Anger	-.06*	(.02)
Disinformation Accusation	-.24†	(.13)
Gender	-.20	(.08)
Constant	5.55***	(.15)
Model indices	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.01	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M	-.01	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.02	(.02)
Index of moderated mediation	-.00	(.01)

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p < .10; N = 850

Table A2.1.5 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of fake news accusation on willingness to read through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Fake News Accusation	-.33	(.74)
Populist Attitudes	.03	(.08)
Fake News Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.08	(.11)
Gender Politician†	.20	(.11)
Constant	3.57***	(.55)
Dependent variable equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Anger	.05	(.04)
Fake News Accusation	-.05	(.19)
Gender Politician	-.09	(.12)
Constant	4.30***	(.23)
Model indices	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.00	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M	.01	(.01)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.02	(.02)
Index of moderated mediation	.00	(.01)

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p < .10; N = 927

Table A2.1.6 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of disinformation accusation on willingness to read through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Disinformation Accusation	-.09	(.79)
Populist Attitudes	.04	(.08)
Disinformation Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.05	(.12)
Gender Politician	.13	(.12)
Constant	3.64***	(.56)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	.08*	(.04)
Disinformation Accusation	-.02	(.20)
Gender	-.09	(.12)
Constant	.22***	(.23)
Model indices	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.01	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M	.02	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.02	(.03)
Index of moderated mediation	(.00)	(.01)

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p < .10; N = 850

Next, we expected that the effects in mediation hypothesis 1 are stronger for the fake news accusation compared to the disinformation accusation (mediation hypothesis 2).

To test this, we ran the analysis of mediation hypothesis 1 again but instead of including the dummy variable for the presence of the disinformation accusation (disinformation accusation condition & fake news accusation condition vs. control condition) as the independent variable, we included a dummy variable for the mention of the phrase “fake news” (fake news accusation condition vs. disinformation accusation condition) as the independent variable. The moderated mediation models with the dummy variable for the mention of “fake news” as the independent variable did not show significant indirect effects on neither general media trust (for citizens with weak populist attitudes (see Table A2.2.1) or trust in the accused outlet (see Table A2.2.2), or on willingness to read (see Table A2.2.3).

Table A.2.2: Mediation hypothesis 2

Table A.2.2.1 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of the mention of "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no) on general media trust through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)	-.22	(.76)
Populist Attitudes	.09	(.08)
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)* Populist Attitudes	.03	(.11)
Gender Politician	.14	(.11)
Constant	3.53***	(.58)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	.03	(.02)
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)	.14	(.13)
Gender Politician	-.18*	(..08)
Constant	4.91***	(.16)
Model indices (Anger)	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.00	(.01)
Populist attitudes at M	-.00	(.01)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.00	(.01)
Index of moderated mediation	.00	(.01)

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, N=883

Table A2.2.2 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of the mention of "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no) on trust in outlet through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)	-.22	(.76)
Populist Attitudes	.09	(.08)
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)* Populist Attitudes	.03	(.11)
Gender Politician	.14	(.11)
Constant	3.53***	(.58)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	-.05†	(.02)
Type (explicit vs. implicit)	-.03	(.13)

Gender Politician	-.23*	(.08)
Constant	5.28***	(.16)
Model indices (Anger)	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.00	(.01)
Populist attitudes at M	.00	(.01)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.00	(.02)
Index of moderated mediation	-.00	(.01)

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N=883

Table A2.2.3 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of the mention of "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no) on willingness to read through anger, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)	-.22	(.76)
Populist Attitudes	.09	(.08)
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)* Populist Attitudes	.03	(.11)
Gender Politician	.14	(.11)
Constant	3.53***	(.58)
Dependent variable equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Anger	.09**	(.04)
Type (1: explicit; 0: implicit)	-.03	(.19)
Gender Politician	-.15	(.12)
Constant	4.19***	(.23)
Model indices (Anger)	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.01	(.03)
Populist attitudes at M	-.01	(.02)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.00	(.03)
Index of moderated mediation	.00	(.01)

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N = 883

Effects of disinformation accusations on perceptions of politician, mediated through anger and enthusiasm

Furthermore, we hypothesized that the effect in H2a (i.e., *The impact of disinformation accusations on the perception of the accusing politician is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that stronger populist attitudes result in a positive effect*) are mediated by enthusiasm towards the politician (mediation hypothesis 3a); and the effect in H2b (*The impact of disinformation accusations on the perception of the accusing politician is moderated by populist attitudes, in such a way that b) weaker populist attitudes result in no effect or a negative effect.*) is mediated by anger towards the politician. (mediation hypothesis 3b).

To test this, we ran a conditional indirect effects model (Hayes, 2017) with the dummy variable for the disinformation accusation (disinformation condition & fake news condition vs. control condition) as the independent variable, populist attitudes as the moderator, anger/enthusiasm towards the politician as the mediator, and perceived trustworthiness of the politician as dependent variable.

Contrary to our expectations, we did not find a significant indirect effect of the fake news accusation on perceived trustworthiness of the politician through anger or enthusiasm (see Table A.2.3.1). Similarly, there is no significant indirect effect of the disinformation accusation on perceived trustworthiness of the politician through anger or enthusiasm (see Table A.2.3.2).

Table A2.3. Mediation hypothesis 3

Table A2.3.1 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of fake news accusation on trustworthiness of politician through anger or enthusiasm, moderated by populist attitudes

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Fake News Accusation	1.02	(.74)
Populist Attitudes	.02	(.08)
Fake News Accusation* Populist Attitudes	-.13	(.11)
Gender Politician	-.03	(.11)
Constant	4.79***	(.55)
Mediator equation (Enthusiasm)	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Fake News Accusation	.82	(.67)
Populist Attitudes	.36***	(.07)
Fake News Accusation* Populist Attitudes	-.06	(.10)
Gender Politician	.06	(.10)
Constant	1.0*	(.50)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	-.24***	(.03)
Enthusiasm	.57***	(.03)
Fake News Accusation	-.34*	(.13)
Gender Politician	.08	(.08)
Constant	3.35***	(.19)
Model indices (Anger)	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.09†	(.06)
Populist attitudes at M	-.05	(.04)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.00	(.07)
Index of moderated mediation	.03	(.03)
Model indices (Enthusiasm)	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.28†	(.13)
Populist attitudes at M	-.21†	(.09)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.15	(.15)
Index of moderated mediation	-.04	.06

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N=927

Table A2.3.2 Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of disinformation accusation on trustworthiness of politician through anger or enthusiasm, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Disinformation Accusation	.71	(.80)
Populist Attitudes	.03	(.08)
Disinformation Accusation* Populist Attitudes	.06	(.12)
Gender Politician	-.17	(.12)
Constant	4.90***	(.57)
Mediator equation (Enthusiasm)	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Disinformation Accusation	.71	(.80)
Populist Attitudes	.03	(.08)
Disinformation Accusation* Populist Attitudes	-.06	(.12)
Gender Politician	-.17	(.12)
Constant	4.90***	(.57)
Dependent variable equation	**b**	**(SE)**
Predictors		
Anger	-.22***	(.03)
Enthusiasm	.60***	(.03)
Disinformation Accusation	-.19	(.14)
Gender Politician	.05	(.09)
Constant	3.22***	(.20)
Model indices (Anger)	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	-.09†	(.06)
Populist attitudes at M	-.07†	(.04)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.05	(.07)
Index of moderated mediation	.01	(.03)
Model indices (Enthusiasm)	**Effect**	**Boot SE**
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.20	(.13)
Populist attitudes at M	.05	(.10)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	-.10	(.16)
Index of moderated mediation	-.09	(.07)

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N=850

Lastly, we expected we expected that the predicted effects in the mediation hypothesis 3 a and b will be stronger for the fake news accusation compared to the disinformation accusation (mediation hypothesis 4). To test this, we ran the analyses from mediation hypothesis 3 again, but instead of including the dummy variable for the presence of the disinformation accusation (disinformation accusation condition & fake news accusation condition vs. control condition) as the independent variable, we included a dummy variable for the mention of the phrase "fake news" (fake news accusation condition vs. disinformation accusation condition) as the independent variable. The moderated mediation models with the dummy variable for the mention of "fake news" as the independent variable did not show significant indirect effects on the perceived trustworthiness of the politician, neither through anger, nor through enthusiasm (see table A2.4).

Table A2.4. mediation hypothesis 4

Bootstrapped moderated mediation model (5.000 samples) of the effect of the mention of "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no) on trustworthiness of politician through anger/enthusiasm, moderated by populist attitudes.

Mediator equation (Anger)	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)	.38	(.75)
Populist Attitudes	-.03	(.08)
Mention "fake news" (1: yes; 0: no)* Populist Attitudes	-.08	(.11)
Gender Politician	.05	(.11)
Constant	5.35***	(.57)
Mediator equation (Enthusiasm)	b	(SE)
Predictors		

Mention “fake news” (1: yes; 0: no)	-.31	(.67)
Populist Attitudes	.20†	(.08)
Mention “fake news” (1: yes; 0: no)* Populist Attitudes	.09	(.10)
Gender Politician	.06	(.10)
Constant	2.13**	(.52)
Dependent variable equation	b	(SE)
Predictors		
Anger	-.19***	(.03)
Enthusiasm	.60***	(.03)
Mention “fake news” (1: yes; 0: no)	-.16	(.14)
Gender Politician	.09	(.08)
Constant	2.85***	(.21)
Model indices (Anger)	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.00	(.05)
Populist attitudes at M	.03	(.10)
Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.05	(.05)
Index of moderated mediation	.02	(.02)
Model indices (Enthusiasm)	Effect	Boot SE
Populist attitudes at M – 1 SE	.09	(.14)
Populist attitudes at M	.10†	(.10)

Populist attitudes at M + 1 SE	.27†	(.15)
Index of moderated mediation	.06	(.06)

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001., N = 883

References

Hayes, A. F. (2017). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. Guilford publications.

Appendix B: Wording of Survey Questions

In the following, we present the wordings of the items used in our survey (translated from German).

General media trust: "When thinking of the established media in Austria, i.e. the major television stations and newspaper publishers, to what extent do you think the following characteristics are suitable to describe the established media and their reporting?"
Dimensions: fair, accurate, unbiased, taking into account all facts, trustworthy, measured on a 11pt scale from "not at all" to "very suitable" (based on Tsfati (2010)).

Trust in attacked medium (i.e., Kleine Zeitung): "To what extent do you think the following characteristics are suitable to describe the Kleine Zeitung and it's reporting?"
Options: fair, accurate, unbiased, taking into account all facts, trustworthy – 11pt scale "not at all" to "very suitable" (based on Tsfati (2010)).

Willingness to read: "Now please think back to the two article previews you just saw on the Twitter page. Imagine you would see these article previews in one of your social media timelines. How likely would it be that you click one of the links to read the whole article?"
Measured on a 11pt-Scale from "not at all likely" to "highly likely" (based on Xu, 2013).

Accuracy Perceptions of Article Main Claim: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements: "Glyphosate causes cancer"

Trustworthiness of Politician: "on a scale from 0 to 10, could you indicate how much the phrase 'trustworthy' describes the politician".

Perceived Manipulative Intent: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement: The politician tried to manipulate me"

Populist attitudes:
Based on Schulz et al. (2017):

Sovereignty of the people: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements": "The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums."; "The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken"

Anti-elitism: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements"; "MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people."; "People like me have no influence on what the government does."

Homogeneity of the people: "Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements"; "Ordinary people all pull together."; "Ordinary people share the same values and interests."

Emotions: We distinguished between emotions towards the attacked news outlet ("Kleine Zeitung") and emotions towards the attacking politician. For both, participants will be asked to indicate how they felt while reading the Twitter page on a 11pt scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much", for the emotions: anxious, angry, hopeful, and enthusiastic.

References:

Schulz, A., Wirth, W., & Müller, P. (2018). We are the people and you are fake news: A social identity approach to populist citizens' false consensus and hostile media perceptions. *Communication Research*, 0093650218794854.

Tsfati, Y. (2010). Online news exposure and trust in the mainstream media: Exploring possible associations. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), 22-42.

Xu, Q. (2013). Social recommendation, source credibility, and recency: Effects of news cues in a social bookmarking website. Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 90(4), 757-775.

Appendix C: Robustness Check

Table C.1. OLS regression models predicting citizens' perceptions of news media, issues, and politicians

	Media Trust				Accuracy Perception		Politician Perceptions			
	General Media Trust		Trust in Outlet		"Glyphosate causes cancer"		Trustworthiness		Manipulative Intent	
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Disinformation accusation (vs. no accusation)	-.19† (.11)	.50† (.28)	-.41** (.14)	-.41 (.35)	-.32* (.14)	-.19 (.35)	-.20 (.15)	-.18 (.37)	.42* (.16)	.50 (.41)
Populist attitudes	.03 (.03)	.13*** (.05)	.04 (.03)	.04 (.05)	.09** (.03)	.11† (.06)	.28*** (.03)	.28*** (.06)	-.13*** (.04)	-.12† (.06)
Populist attitudes* Disinformation accusation		-.14** (.05)		.00 (.07)		-.03 (.07)		.00 (.07)		-.02 (.08)
Male politician	-.21 (.13)	-.22† (.13)	-.20 (.16)	-.20 (.16)	.01 (.16)	.01 (.16)	-.22 (.17)	-.23 (.17)	.20 (.19)	.20 (.19)
Female politician	-.29* (.13)	-.29* (.13)	-.51** (.16)	-.51** (.16)	.04 (.16)	.04 (.16)	.30† (.17)	.30† (.17)	-.33† (.19)	-.33† (.19)
Constant	5.15*** (.17)	4.68*** (.24)	5.23*** (.21)	5.23*** (.21)	7.05*** (.21)	6.96*** (.30)	2.86*** (.22)	2.85*** (.32)	5.66*** (.24)	5.61*** (.35)
Adjusted R^2	.004	.01	.01	.01	.01	.01	.06	.06	.02	.02

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, *N = 1,330*

Table C.2. OLS regression models predicting citizens' perceptions of news media, issues, and politicians - difference for inclusion vs. exclusion of "fake news"

	Media Trust				Accuracy Perceptions		Politician Perceptions			
	General Media Trust		Trust in Outlet		"Glyphosate causes cancer"		Trustworthiness		Manipulative Intent	
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Fake news mentioned (vs. no mention)	.14 (.13)	.01 (.33)	-.03 (.16)	.00 (.40)	-.26 (.16)	-.37 (.41)	.04 (.17)	.32 (.42)	.11 (.19)	.18 (.47)
Populist attitudes	-.01 (.03)	-.03 (.05)	.04 (.04)	.05 (.06)	.08* (.04)	.07 (.06)	.28*** (.04)	.31*** (.06)	-.14** (.04)	-.13† (.07)
Populist attitudes* Fake News mentioned (vs. no mention)		.03 (.06)		-.01 (.08)		.02 (.08)		-.06 (.08)		-.01 (.09)
Male politician	-.18 (.16)	-.18 (.16)	-.09 (.20)	-.09 (.20)	.19 (.20)	.19 (.20)	-.13 (.21)	-.13 (.21)	.10 (.23)	.10 (.23)
Female politician	-.34* (.16)	-.34* (.16)	-.47* (.20)	-.47* (.20)	.13 (.20)	.13 (.20)	.23 (.20)	.24 (.20)	.21 (.23)	-.21 (.23)
Constant	5.11*** (.20)	5.18*** (.26)	4.79*** (.25)	4.77*** (.32)	6.82*** (.25)	6.88*** (.33)	2.63*** (.26)	2.47*** (.34)	6.04*** (.29)	6.00*** (.37)
Adjusted R^2	.002	.001	.004	.004	.004	.003	.05	.05	.01	.01

Note: † p<.1 * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, *N = 883*

Appendix D: Stimulus Examples and Translation

	Fake News Condition	Disinformation Condition	Control Condition
Tweet text 1:	Excellent example for fake news!	Excellent example for faulty news!	
News article preview 1:	Consequences for producer of carcinogenic weed killer. Monsanto sentenced to pay $80 million	Consequences for producer of carcinogenic weed killer. Monsanto sentenced to pay $80 million	Consequences for producer of carcinogenic weed killer. Monsanto sentenced to pay $80 million
	Monsanto parent company @Bayer appeals. Numerous regulatory authorities assess Glyphosate weed killer as safe	Monsanto parent company @Bayer appeals. Numerous regulatory authorities assess Glyphosate weed killer as safe	Monsanto parent company @Bayer appeals. Numerous regulatory authorities assess Glyphosate weed killer as safe
Tweet text 3:	Enjoying the sight in Vorarlberg! #vacation #hiking	Enjoying the sight in Vorarlberg! #vacation #hiking	Enjoying the sight in Vorarlberg! #vacation #hiking
Tweet text 4:	What the fake news media don't report: There are also scientific studies that proof the safety of #glyphosate	What the lying news media don't report: There are also scientific studies that proof the safety of #glyphosate	There are also scientific studies that proof the safety of #glyphosate
Tweet text 5:	Bayer points out that weed killers are considered safe by regulatory authorities around the world when used properly. I am tired of the fake news in the media!	Bayer points out that weed killers are considered safe by regulatory authorities around the world when used properly. I am tired of the incomplete reporting of the media!	Bayer points out that weed killers are considered safe by regulatory authorities around the world when used properly
Tweet text 6:	That's how fake news journalism works!	That's how bad journalism works!	
News article preview 2:	Why glyphosate should be prohibited throughout Austria. Study backs up suspicion of link between glyphosate and increased cancer risk	Why glyphosate should be prohibited throughout Austria. Study backs up suspicion of link between glyphosate and increased cancer risk	Why glyphosate should be prohibited throughout Austria. Study backs up suspicion of link between glyphosate and increased cancer risk

Tweet text 7:	Whether #glyphosate really causes cancer, is still to be found out! The fake news in the media are not helpful here!	Whether #glyphosate really causes cancer, is still to be found out! The deceptive reporting in the media are not helpful here!	Whether #glyphosate really causes cancer, is still to be found out!
Tweet text 8:	Happy weekend!	Happy weekend!	Happy weekend!


Johanna Weber
451 Tweets
Folgen
Johanna Weber
@johannaweber_34
Gemeinderätin Tulln.
Tulln, Österreich
tulln.at
Seit November 2012 bei Twitter
236 Folge ich
1.012 Follower
Tweets
Tweets und Antworten
Medien
Gefällt mir
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 1. Juni
Exzellentes Beispiel für Fake News!
KLEINE ZEITUNG
Konsequenzen für Hersteller von krebserregendem Unkrautvern...
Monsanto zu Zahlung von 80 Millionen Dollar verurteilt.
kleinezeitung.at
44 16 53
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 1. Juni
Monsanto Mutterkonzern @Bayer geht in Berufung. Unzählige Zulassungsbehörden bewerten #Glyphosat Unkrautvernichter als sicher.
14 24
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 30. Mai
Genieße die Aussicht in Vorarlberg! #urlaub #wandern
7 15
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Was die Fake News Medien nicht berichten: Es gibt auch wissenschaftliche Studien, die die Sicherheit von #Glyphosat beweisen.
21 13 35
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Bayer verweist darauf, dass Zulassungsbehörden weltweit den Unkrautvernichter bei sachgemäßer Anwendung als sicher bewerteten. Ich bin die Fake News der Medien Leid!
7 1 11
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
So geht Fake News Journalismus!
Kleine Zeitung @kleinezeitung · 26. Mai
Warum Glyphosat österreichweit verboten werden sollte.
Studie erhärtet Verdacht auf Zusammenhang zwischen Glyphosat und erhöhtem Krebsrisiko. kleinezeitung.at/politik/warum_glyphosat_verboten...
5
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Ob #glyphosat wirklich krebserregend ist, gilt es erst herauszufinden! Die Fake News der Medien helfen hier nicht weiter!
14 24
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 22. Mai
Schönes Wochenende!
8


Johanna Weber
451 Tweets
Folgen
Johanna Weber
@johannaweber_34
Gemeinderätin Tulln.
Tulln, Österreich
tulln.at
Seit November 2012 bei Twitter
236 Folge ich
1.012 Follower
Tweets
Tweets und Antworten
Medien
Gefällt mir
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 1. Juni
Exzellentes Beispiel für fehlerhafte Berichterstattung!
KLEINE ZEITUNG
Konsequenzen für Hersteller von krebserregendem Unkrautvern...
Monsanto zu Zahlung von 80 Millionen Dollar verurteilt.
kleinezeitung.at
44 16 53
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 1. Juni
Monsanto Mutterkonzern @Bayer geht in Berufung. Unzählige Zulassungsbehörden bewerten #Glyphosat Unkrautvernichter als sicher.
14 24
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 30. Mai
Genieße die Aussicht in Vorarlberg! #urlaub #wandern
7 15
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Was die verlogenen Medien nicht berichten: Es gibt auch wissenschaftliche Studien, die die Sicherheit von #Glyphosat beweisen.
21 13 35
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Bayer verweist darauf, dass Zulassungsbehörden weltweit den Unkrautvernichter bei sachgemäßer Anwendung als sicher bewerteten. Ich bin die lückenhafte Berichterstattung der Medien leid!
7 1 11
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
So geht schlechter Journalismus!
Kleine Zeitung @kleinezeitung · 1. Okt.
Warum Glyphosat österreichweit verboten werden sollte.
Studie erhärtet Verdacht auf Zusammenhang zwischen Glyphosat und erhöhtem Krebsrisiko. kleinezeitung.at/politik/warum_glyphosat_verboten...
5
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 26. Mai
Ob #glyphosat wirklich krebserregend ist, gilt es erst herauszufinden! Die täuschende Berichterstattung der Medien hilft hier nicht weiter!
14 24
Johanna Weber @johannaweber_34 · 22. Mai
Schönes Wochenende!
8

Abstract English

The term “fake news” is widely used in public discourse and is mainly understood as disinformation that is made to look like news articles. However, the term “fake news” is also used by politicians to delegitimize news media. This dissertation makes a distinction between these two conceptually different phenomena: the *fake news genre* (i.e., deliberate creation of pseudo-journalistic disinformation) and the *fake news label* (i.e., political instrument to delegitimize news media). It furthermore argues that the latter stands representative for a broader, worrying trend: *increasing attempts by political actors to delegitimize journalism,* and that this trend is connected to populist political communication strategies. While most scholarly interest focuses on the prevalence and effects of the fake news genre and other forms of disinformation, the discursive construction of “fake news” in general, and the use of the fake news label and delegitimizing media criticism specifically, can be equally disrupting and are thus at least as pressing to study. Therefore, this multimethod, cumulative dissertation *what fake news is, how it is used, and what its consequences are.*

More specifically, Study 1 addresses the question how we can meaningfully integrate “fake news”, systematically reviewing the relevant literature and providing the above introduced conceptualization of fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon. Study 2 is a quantitative content analysis of Austrian news articles on “fake news”, which shows that journalists have not only contributed to its salience in public discourse, but have also normalized and trivialized the phrase to describe anything that is “false”. It furthermore provides evidence that the fake news label is mostly used by populist politicians against the media in general. Another quantitative content analysis (Study 3) investigates how prevalent delegitimizing media criticism and the fake news label specifically are in the social media communication of Austrian and German politicians, showing that both is rarely used, but when

present mainly expressed by populist actors. Lastly, Study 4 experimentally tests the effects of the use of the fake news label by politicians on citizens' perceptions of media, information and politicians, taking into account the moderating role of populist attitudes. The results suggest that there are some detrimental effects for citizens' perceptions of news media and information, which are partly moderated by populist attitudes, while perceptions of politicians remain largely unaffected.

Abstract German

Der Begriff "Fake News" ist im öffentlichen Diskurs weit verbreitet und wird hauptsächlich verwendet um als Nachrichtenartikel aufgemachte Desinformation zu beschreiben. "Fake News" wird jedoch auch von Politikern verwendet, um Nachrichtenmedien zu delegitimieren. In dieser Dissertation wird zwischen diesen beiden konzeptionell unterschiedlichen Phänomenen differenziert: dem *Fake News Genre* (d. h. absichtlich erstelle pseudo-journalistischer Desinformation) und dem *Fake News Label* (d. h. politischen Instrument zur Delegitimierung von Nachrichtenmedien). Letzteres steht stellvertretend für einen breiteren, besorgniserregenden Trend: die zunehmenden Versuche politischer Akteure, den Journalismus zu delegitimieren. Dieser Trend scheint mit populistischen politischen Kommunikationsstrategien verbunden zu sein. Forschung zu Fake News fokussiert sich vor allem auf die Verbreitung und die Auswirkungen des Fake News Gerne und anderer Formen der Desinformation. Diese Dissertation argumentiert, dass die Verwendung von "Fake News" in öffentlichen Diskursen und insbesondere die Instrumentalisierung des Fake News Labels als delegitimierende Medienkritik mindestens ebenso folgenschwer sein können und daher ein dringender Forschunsbedarf besteht. Daher beschäftigt sich diese multimethodische, kumulative Dissertation mit der Frage was Fake News is, wie es verwendet wird, und welche Konsequenzen seine Verwendung hat.

Studie 1 befasst sich insbesondere mit der Frage, wie Wissenschaftler "Fake News" sinnvoll nutzen können, indem sie die einschlägige Literatur systematisch aufarbeitet und die oben eingeführte Konzeptualisierung von Fake News als zweidimensionales Phänomen liefert. Studie 2 ist eine quantitative Inhaltsanalyse von österreichischen Nachrichtenartikeln über "Fake News", die zeigt, dass Journalisten nicht nur zu deren Bedeutung im öffentlichen Diskurs beigetragen haben, sondern den Begriff auch normalisiert und trivialisiert haben, um alles zu

beschreiben, was "falsch" ist. Darüber hinaus liefert sie den Beweis, dass die Bezeichnung "Fake News" hauptsächlich von populistischen Politikern gegen die Medien im Allgemeinen verwendet wird. Eine weitere quantitative Inhaltsanalyse (Studie 3) untersucht, wie verbreitet delegitimierende Medienkritik und die Bezeichnung das Fake News Label in der Social-Media-Kommunikation österreichischer und deutscher Politiker sind. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass beides selten verwendet wird, wenn, dann hauptsächlich von populistischen Akteuren. Studie 4 befasst sich mit den Effekten von Fake News Label Anschludigungen auf die Wahrnemungen der BürgerInnen. Genauer gesagt, wird experimentell gestestet welche Auswirkungen das Fake News Label auf die Wahrnehmung von Medien, Informationen und Politikern hat. Zudem wird die moderierende Rolle populistischer Einstellungen berücksichtigt. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass es Fake News Label Anschuldigungen negative Effekte auf die Wahrnehmung von Nachrichtenmedien und Informationen haben, die teilweise durch populistische Einstellungen moderiert sind. Die Wahrnehmung von Politikern weitgehend unbeeinflusst bleibt.

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