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*Commentary*

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## Mis- and disinformation studies are too big to fail: Six suggestions for the field's future

*Who are mis-/disinformation studies for? What agenda does the field serve? How can it be improved? While the increase in the attention towards the topic in the last years is healthy, it has also led to an explosion of papers in all directions, and the field has been subject to various criticisms and attacks. In this commentary, we discuss the status and wider impact of the field, raise current challenges, and propose ways ahead for the development of a more critical, interdisciplinary, and rigorous scholarly discipline of mis- and disinformation studies.*

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### Introduction

The field of mis- and disinformation studies is here to stay.<sup>2</sup> It is firmly entrenched in various academic disciplines, with work coming from areas such as sociology, communication, medicine and pharmacology, as well as computer science (Righetti et al., 2022). A broad range of funding bodies and governments have devoted significant financial resources to the study of mis-/disinformation, and journalists and policymakers continue to display a keen interest in the topic. Altogether, this has resulted in renewed efforts to understand how our information environment works and how it can, and should, be improved. The field has long been in the crosshairs, with critics finding fault—among other things—with its normative underpinnings and agenda, methodological rigor and quality of output, as well as with its impact in shaping public opinion and policymaking (Adler-Bell, 2022; Bernstein, 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2018; Hwang, 2020). Mis-/disinformation studies has been accused of lacking clear definitions, having a

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<sup>1</sup> A publication of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

<sup>2</sup> We define mis- and disinformation studies loosely as a multi-disciplinary and developing field of study that focuses on studying multimodal forms of communication, which unintentionally (misinformation) or intentionally (disinformation) misinform audiences. This includes the study of motivations (e.g., political, ideological, or financial), actors, and the mechanisms by which false or misleading information is created, distributed, and received, and the ways it may affect audiences in their beliefs and behaviors.

simplified understanding of what it studies, a too great emphasis on media effects, a neglect of intersectional factors, an outsized influence of funding bodies and policymakers on the research agenda of the field, and an outsized impact of the field on policy and policymaking.

This presents a challenge. With mis-/disinformation studies in our view being “too big [and important] to fail,” the question is then what to do with this state of affairs: how should we address the real shortcomings of the field to ensure its positive long-term impact? We deem a complete overhaul of mis-/disinformation studies unlikely—nor is it necessarily needed. Instead, in this commentary we draw on the most salient criticism the field has received and propose a number of ways to address it so as to further develop mis-/disinformation studies as a rigorous and robust field of research, thus safeguarding its positive contributions to society.

## **Taking stock: The strengths and weaknesses of mis- and disinformation studies**

A first step is to clearly acknowledge the positive and negative effects of the rise of mis-/disinformation studies as a field. The most evident positive effect has been the mobilization of wider society around the real dangers arising from dis- and misinformation, for example, around elections, pandemics, or political conflicts. We side with Guess (2021) who has argued that various “research strands have succeeded in providing descriptive and causal evidence on the scope of the misinformation problem” (p. 2) as well as possible interventions. The flurry of activity since 2016 after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump—arguably catalysts for the emergence of the field—have also helped shine a spotlight on the general quality and structure of our information and media environments, their interdependency with functioning democracies, and how they have been reshaped through digital media (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021b). This, in turn, has spurred greater awareness and investment on these issues, for example, in journalistic reporting that has held platforms and purveyors of mis-/disinformation accountable, as well as various initiatives which seek to improve the quality of information available to audiences, such as fact checkers. Meanwhile, terms such as *disinformation studies* and *infodemiology* have also become effective trading zones (Bensaude Vincent, 2014, p. 250) which allow for different stakeholders—in this case, academics, journalists, funders, policymakers, and the wider public—to communicate with each other and investigate a topic which clearly calls for multidisciplinary perspectives (Simon & Camargo, 2021).

Unfortunately, there have also been undesirable consequences and various critiques have been made against the field in this regard. Some recent criticisms include:

- a) The persistence of a “fuzzy ontology,” with terms that have conflicting and ambiguous meanings “often thrown around with little justification” (Hwang, 2020, p. 1; Pabst, 2022, p.1). While various disciplines grapple with the problem of finding good working definitions in response to questions and phenomena that have no single right answer or definition, the failure to reach commonly agreed-upon understandings of what we mean when we talk about mis- or disinformation makes it more difficult to research and address them (Adler-Bell, 2022; Bernstein, 2021; Farkas & Schou, 2018; Hwang, 2020).
- b) A sometimes simplistic understanding of the effects of media, media technologies, and journalistic processes (Jungherr et al., 2020; Mercier, 2020).
- c) A neglect of issues and conflicts of race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as status, inequality, social structure, and power and a reduction of these issues to epistemological and perceptual issues (Kreiss, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Relatedly, critics have accused the field of being often too U.S.-focused and Anglocentric, generalizing from a very peculiar set of cases, limited by its strong focus on social and digital media in general, and selected platforms in particular.

- d) The risk of a dilution of scientific quality as the topic grows in popularity (Simon & Camargo, 2021), encouraged by incentive structures that can favor rapid and attention-grabbing results over those deriving from more time-consuming and rigorous approaches (West & Bergstrom, 2021). This includes an outsized influence of funding bodies and policymakers in shaping research directions (Abhishek, 2021). In this context, critics have also highlighted that studies in the field are at times unclear about the boundaries and limitations of their findings, thus fanning moral panics and “contributing to an overall sense of democratic crisis” (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021a, p. 10).
- e) An outsized impact of mis-/disinformation studies on policy and policymaking (Adler-Bell, 2022; Bernstein, 2021) with work based on sometimes questionable premises and methods shaping policies and political decisions, which have often turned out to be problematic from a human rights perspective (“Inconvenient Truths,” 2021; Novak, 2020; Radu, 2020). The close connection to the world of policy also sits uneasily with the fact that “misinformation often comes from the top” (Nielsen, 2019; see also Brennen et al., 2020) and that “government officials are [often] professional liars” (Adler-Bell, 2022, p. 1), which may lead to an inability to challenge structures of power fundamental to mis- and disinformation’s proliferation.

## Facing the critics: Six suggestions for mis- and disinformation studies

While we do not necessarily agree with all the points listed previously, we think that they cannot be easily ignored either. Consequently, we have the following suggestions that might contribute to pushing mis-/disinformation studies as a whole onto firmer ground:

### 1) *Critically reflect on mis-/disinformation studies’ audience and agenda*

In other words, who are mis-/disinformation studies for? Whose agenda does the field serve? The heightened attention around its subject matter places the field of mis- and disinformation studies in a unique position: whatever counts as mis-/disinformation will likely be regulated as such. This extra pressure means that it is fundamentally important for scholars to be mindful not just of whether their research is useful for scholarship and theory, but also for whom it is useful—beyond the realm of academic inquiry—and for what purpose. This is not to say these studies should not be done, but rather that they should be done with the multitude of other “end-users” in mind. This point is also intimately connected to our next point.

### 2) *Interrogate the wider impact of mis-/disinformation studies*

Despite the positive effects of a rallying cry for countering mis- and disinformation, terms that evoke crisis and emergency discourse—such as *misinformation crisis*, *information wars*, and *infodemic*—not only obfuscate the complexity of the situation but also create an atmosphere of “moral panic”<sup>3</sup> (Hwang, 2020; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021a), which can itself contribute to a delegitimation of democratic processes and institutions and potentially provide cover for political leaders keen to curb human rights. As mentioned above, various international leaders and governments have used the pandemic and the alleged flood of misinformation or “fake news” as an excuse to pass laws that effectively curtail fundamental human rights, such as freedom of speech or press freedom (Ong, 2021; Radu, 2020; Simon

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<sup>3</sup> Here understood as an instance of public anxiety or alarm in response to a problem regarded as threatening the (moral) standards and fabric of society.

& Camargo, 2021). While it would be a stretch to argue that this is the field's fault, there still needs to be a reckoning with the impact mis- /disinformation studies has, especially in light of the varying quality standards of some work in this area.

*3) Investigate the main actors and incentives, as well as their relationships with funders, policymakers, journalists, and affected communities*

Studies assessing the potentially negative impact of the increased attention towards mis- and disinformation (e.g., Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021a; Radu, 2020) are still rare, but necessary. As critics have highlighted, the field is subject to some of the same dynamics that have plagued its predecessors—such as the fields of mass communication, propaganda studies, political science, and behavioural science—in their early decades, where genuine academic inquiry was often intertwined with the hunt for personal fame, influence, and commercial opportunities (Lepore, 2021). These dynamics are exacerbated by a modern academic landscape that increasingly encourages researchers to become rapid-response experts and orient their work towards topics and questions that carry the promise of attracting funding and media attention (Falkenberg, 2020; Fochler, 2016; Simon, 2020). These dynamics are not unique to mis-/disinformation studies, but they ought to be taken seriously.

While mis-/disinformation studies' deep enmeshment in the spheres of academia, media, and policy is one issue, its relationship to the communities it studies—especially those affected by mis- and disinformation—is another. Consequently, a thorough self-assessment is needed, aiming to identify the central groups of actors and their incentives, along with the core tenets of the field, while also shining a light on the flows of influence, values, and priorities between philanthropists, funders, academics, policymakers, and the media. A transparent self-assessment is especially important considering the point above about the wider impact of mis-/disinformation studies—and is what ultimately makes the field “too big to fail.”

*4) Challenge the ahistoricism of the field and clarify its normative positions*

One of the key problems of mis-/disinformation studies is its lack of historical grounding. We agree with Anderson (2021), who argues that “the field needs to be more conscious of its own history, particularly its historical conceptual predecessors” (p. 5), namely mass communication and persuasion, propaganda studies, and behavioral science. Founded and flourishing in the U.S. Cold War environment of the 1950s, these fields' concerns with the manipulation of supposedly gullible populations (Mercier, 2020) and their implicit emphasis of technocratic control continue to shape the field of mis-/disinformation to this day (Abhishek, 2021; Anderson, 2021; Lepore, 2021). This reckoning with the field's origins should include, as Anderson (2021) goes on to state, “taking a normative position on what a good information environment would look like from the point of view of political theory” (p. 5). The problem here is clear: if one operates without awareness of one's priors (in terms of theories or normative positions), one inevitably relies on implicit versions of both. It is better to foreground these priors than to be subliminally guided and perhaps misled by them (Schroeder, 2018). Mis-/disinformation studies should strive to do the same.

*5) Broaden mis-/disinformation studies' scope*

Mis- and disinformation, propaganda, and any other form of information and communication are inherently contextual and situated within deep-rooted national, political, social, cultural, racial, and ethnical contexts (Kreiss, 2021; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Phillips & Milner, 2021). The field should reflect on this and take it into account. By *this*, we mean that, for one, mis-/disinformation studies should look beyond “the usual suspects” such as the United States, English-speaking countries, and the Global North

more broadly, and consider in more detail the role of race, gender, and class, as well as the other factors mentioned above (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020; Nguyễn et al., 2022; Shabbir et al., 2022).

This need for a broader demographic scope also applies to the social media platforms being studied. While focusing on specific platforms such as Twitter is understandable from a data availability perspective, this narrow scope becomes an issue considering how much of our information and communication happens outside of these platforms. It is not just that certain demographic sectors are over- or under-represented on Twitter, or that different countries might use VKontakte or Weibo instead; audiences still consume news and information via traditional—but often less studied—means such as TV, or increasingly through social messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Telegram (Allen et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2022). It is, therefore, important to broaden our focus to the larger media ecosystem (Benkler et al., 2018; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Phillips & Milner, 2021).

While there has been progress in this regard, we believe that current efforts do not go far enough. Widening perspectives, case studies, and sources of scholarship are needed not only to achieve equity but also for producing methodologically stronger papers.

### 6) *Improve methodological rigor*

While rigor can take (and should take) many different forms, we see a commitment to methods-agnostic approaches as one of the most pressing issues. The question and the topic under investigation should drive the selection of methods, not vice-versa. This includes a greater appreciation for and support of qualitative and mixed-methods research alongside computational methods. This argument works in both directions: it is important for qualitative work in mis-/disinformation to become more accepting of, for example, Bayesian statistics, RCTs, and computational modelling, but also for computational approaches to become more demanding when it comes to the theory and operationalization of what is being measured. Mis-/disinformation research is often interdisciplinary, and as experts in the field such as Joe Bak-Coleman and Rachel Moran have argued (Radzvilavicius, 2022), outlets that publish such type of work at a quick turnaround are sorely needed to ensure the timely provision of methodologically sound information to policymakers and the public.

Another promising avenue for improving methodological rigor in mis-/disinformation studies could be adversarial collaborations (e.g., the Adversarial Collaboration Project,<sup>4</sup> Rakow et al., 2015) both in empirical and theoretical work. As things stand, the field is composed of actors with sometimes widely differing viewpoints, something well encapsulated for example by the debates around the effects of mis-/disinformation. Such good-faith collaborations between antagonistic camps might lead to better outcomes than the current gridlock often marked by ad hominem attacks and the somewhat credulous belief in the self-correcting nature of the scientific enterprise (which might be the case in the *longue durée* but often seems to fail in the short term).

## Conclusions

The future of mis- and disinformation studies does not have to look like the present. We do not want to suggest that the present state of the field is dismal. It isn't. But to simply dismiss the critiques lobbied against it out of hand would not be responsible either. Mis-/disinformation studies has made important—and much-needed—contributions, which allow us to gain a deeper understanding of our information environments and hopefully improve and reshape them, and by extension our societies, for the better. As such, the field is too big to fail—and cannot be allowed to. Therefore, it is vital that the community active

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://web.sas.upenn.edu/adcollabproject/about/>

in this space engages with the shortcomings of the field and tries to find ways to address them. We hope that our commentary can provide some guidance on the matter.

Ultimately, the recommendations we make here are applicable to any field in the social sciences and humanities. Critically reflecting on a field's actors, history, and impact is important to understand its past and present while clarifying its epistemic priors, normative positions, incentives, and agendas, and is necessary when deciding its future directions. In this context, however, these are more than healthy scholarly habits. We believe the changes we suggest here (or equivalent ones) will be essential to the development of mis-/disinformation studies as a rigorous and impactful discipline—one which is wide in scope, robust in its methodological approaches, and whose benefits extend across our whole information ecosystem.

Undoubtedly, the main problem with building solid foundations for a field from the inside is that any such undertaking requires sometimes uncomfortable choices by the involved actors, which go against very strong incentives to keep things the same. Yet, looking at other fields' capacity for self-reform (albeit slowly and in piecemeal fashion)—as evidenced, for instance, by the “replication crisis” in psychology—makes us hopeful that mis- and disinformation studies can ultimately achieve the same.

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Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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