



Belgium-Luxembourg
Digital Media and
Disinformation Observatory

Folk theories of info-democratic disorders in Belgium and Luxembourg preliminary results from an ongoing qualitative audience study

Executive summary of deliverable 3.2.2.

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

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

Introduction

This document summarizes the preliminary results of an ongoing research that focuses on the folk theories of info-democratic disorders in Belgium and Luxembourg. This project is part of the EDMO BELUX hub, which aims to reinforce the monitoring of and the research on disinformation in Belgium and Luxembourg. Within the research component of EDMO BELUX, this specific endeavor aims at contributing to the assessment of the impact of disinformation on society and democratic processes. To do so, it focuses on how audiences themselves theorise the nexus between information disorders and democratic disorders, and relies on a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 30 informants in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Theoretical framework

By "information disorders", we do not only mean disinformation proper, i.e. the intentional fabrication or falsification of facts masquerading as traditional news, but more broadly any type of problem or difficulty - e.g. misinformation, "fake news", propaganda, ideologically-charge content - that people encounter regarding how they come to know what is going on in the world. Similarly, our notion of "democratic disorders" refers to any type of problem or difficulty that people encounter regarding how they live and perform their citizenship in a democratic society broadly speaking (not limited to institutionalized politics).

In this study, we aim to better understand how people diversely theorise info-democratic disorders. Researchers in the social sciences who are using the notion of "folk theory" acknowledge the fact that not only scientists theorise what is happening in the world – also non-scientists do. The notion of "folk theory" describes the set of beliefs, suppositions, simplifications, guesses, etc., through which people produce a generalized view of a certain phenomenon.

Below (Table 1) is a summary of the differences between scientific theories and folk theories as we approach them in the context of this study¹.

Table 1. Summary of our approach to scientific theories and folk theories

Scientific theory	Folk theory
Set of interconnected ideas	
Generalized view on a given phenomenon	
May be descriptive, explanatory, prescriptive/normative, or predictive/prospective	
Based on empirical evidence built through the systematic application of data collection and analysis methods	Based on personal experiences, discussions with friends, and general knowledge provided by the media

¹ Our approach to folk theories is based on the following references, among others: DeVito, M. A., Birnholtz, J., Hancock, J. T., French, M., & Liu, S. (2018). How People Form Folk Theories of Social Media Feeds and What it Means for How We Study Self-Presentation. *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173694>; Nielsen, R. K. (2016). Folk Theories of Journalism: The Many Faces of a Local Newspaper. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), 840-848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1165140>.

Accepted at a given time on the basis of institutionalized standards and practices within a given scientific community	Socially shared through more or less informal networks
Mostly aimed at expanding knowledge	Mostly aimed at orienting action in everyday life

Research design

This study proceeds through semi-directive interviews with Belgian and Luxembourgish informants. The final aim of the research is to collect and analyse 30 such interviews. In this first phase of the study, we analysed the first ten interviews already done. For the purpose of clarifying the profiles of our informants, the group can be divided into five categories differing in terms of how they relate themselves to legacy media and (self-proclaimed) “alternative” media (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of media users interviewed and their relationships to legacy and (self-proclaimed) “alternative” media

Category of media users	Use of legacy media as...	Use of “alternative” media as...	#
The loyal consumer	Trusted sources of information	/	2
The loyal debunker	Trusted sources of information	“Fake news” to be debunked	3
The news shopper	Trusted sources of information	Trusted sources of information	1
The rebel debunker	“Fake news” to be debunked	Trusted sources of information	2
The rebel	/	Trusted sources of information	2

Our strategy for analysing the interviews was mostly inductive and consisted of three steps. (1) First, we coded the interviews thematically to identify theoretical statements on info-democratic disorders. (2) Second, we proceeded with informant-by-informant analyses to (re)assemble each of the informants’ statements into a more or less coherent theoretical discourse on info-democratic disorders. (3) Finally, we conducted a transversal analysis of the informant-by-informant analyses, which allowed us to identify and differentiate the folk theories from each other.

Key Findings

Our preliminary results show that people theorise info-democratic disorders in different ways and often combine several folk theories with each other. So far, our study has identified 10 (sub-)folk theories:

(1) Legacy media do the job, errors are human: according to this folk theory, legacy media –mostly highbrow– are not perfect but can be trusted. They sometimes make minor human mistakes, but these are unintentional and do not put into question the overall professionalism of the journalistic work done, nor do they impact the functioning of democracy.

(2) Democracy deserves better than poor journalism²: this body of folk theories considers that legacy media in general – and low-brow legacy media in particular: do their job poorly. We observed three variations of this folk theory:

(2.1) “Fast clicks”: this variant argues that the main problem with news (in both social media and legacy media) is the speed with which journalists have to work, which is deemed detrimental to both the verification of facts and the in-depth coverage of news.

(2.2) Sensationalism: what is at stake here is the overall sensationalist angle that guides news selection and production – which leads to the poor quality of news and the lack of priority given to more important subjects.

(2.3) There’s no contradiction: this folk theory blames journalists of legacy media (often called “official” or “mainstream” media) for failing to serve as a counter-power, in the sense that they spread news that supports the viewpoints (and actions) of the governing elites and do not give the floor to “contradictory” ways of thinking – which can be found in “alternative” media. This theory does not go as far as saying that there is a conspiracy involving the State and/or industrial and financial groups.

(3) Politics is not sexy: this folk theory states that in Belgium the communication between the government and the governed is deficient (although not manipulative), which has the negative effect of alienating people from politics.

(4) “Fake profiles” disturb the public debate: this folk theory addresses the role of social media in a deliberative democracy. It argues that intimidation by fake profiles does not allow a frank, polite and serene debate. It also argues that social media exacerbate antagonisms, which makes debating increasingly challenging – sometimes with negative consequences for users’ mental health.

(5) Follow the money: the main info-democratic disorder addressed in this body of folk theories is that the so-called “fake news” produced by legacy media is aligned with the interests of financial and industrial groups or elites. This theory emphasizes both the manipulative intention of economic (and political) elites, and the ideological role of legacy media. According to this theory, one can only find “independent” news in so-called “alternative” media. We observed two variants:

(5.1) News serves the business of big media companies: the first variant argues that legacy media are influenced - it is often not clear how - by the “business men” who own media companies and/or by industrial and financial conglomerates who use the media to establish their businesses.

² We borrow the expression “poor journalism” from: Nielsen, R. K., & Graves, L. (2017). “News you don’t believe”: Audience perspectives on fake news. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism with the support of Google and the Digital News Initiative. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/news-you-dont-believe-audience-perspectives-fake-news>

(5.2) News is part of a conspiracy led by “higher” economic interests and involving politicians: the second variant argues that both legacy media and politicians are subservient of “*higher economic interests*”. What these “higher economic interests” are is not always clear. In any case, it is the entire media and political system that is being manipulated while democracy is increasingly resembling a “*totalitarian*” regime. This perspective may be considered a conspiracy theory to the extent that it explains info-democratic disorders by a wide ranging and deterministic plot led by financial elites.

(6) What’s true or not is only a matter of one’s viewpoint: this folk theory states that what is true or false is just a matter of perspective, or, to put it differently, that both sides are right each from their own point of view. From this perspective, any claim to be “truer than another” – as is the case with fact-checking – is therefore to be taken with a grain of salt. While in principle every piece of information is said to be suspect, those of so-called “*official*” media are deemed more so than the others.

(7) Everything is suspect on social media: this folk theory mainly blames social media as the engine for spreading “*fake news*”. According to this theory, it is becoming increasingly difficult for users to find their way around and to detect false information. The notions of true or false still have a meaning, though. One solution to mitigate the impact of “*fake news*” on society would be to improve the education system in general, and media literacy in particular.

Conclusion

Despite being preliminary, our results already show the added value of a “folk theory” approach to understand how citizens diversely make sense of info-democratic disorders. These results do not provide a final overview of the folk theories circulating in Belgium, though, since the informants we met so far are almost all French speaking. The current interviews will need to be complemented by interviews with Dutch-speaking Belgians as well as with Luxembourgish people.

According to our approach to folk theories, a single individual may hold several theories on info-democratic disorders. This issue would benefit from being explored further in the light of a larger and more diverse group of informants, both theoretically – *i.e.* how should we conceptualise the articulation between folk theories? – and analytically – *i.e.* what combinations of theories can be observed and how do these theories combine with each other?

Finally, beyond what our informants say about fact-checking and media education, there are lessons to be learned about how such initiatives aimed at “fighting dis-/misinformation” should better take into account the theories that people develop about them. The EDMO network is a most relevant arena for discussing further such issues with the various partners – not only academics but also journalists, fact-checkers, and media educators.