14

Some Truths About Lies

Misinformation and Inequality in Policymaking and Politics

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How do the dual trends of increased misinformation in politics and increased socioeconomic inequality contribute to an erosion of trust and confidence in democratic institutions? In an era of massive misinformation, voters bear the burden of separating truth from lies as they determine how they stand on important issue areas and which candidates to support. When candidates engage in misinformation, it uncouples the already weak link among vote intentions, candidate choice, and policy outputs. At the same time, high levels of economic inequality and social stratification may contribute to lower levels of institutional trust, and the correspondingly more insular socioeconomic groups may experience misinformation differently. Social policy, as a policy area intentionally designed to alleviate risk and redistribute resources, thus becomes a special case where the effects of misinformation and socioeconomic inequality may be cross-cutting and heightened.

We examine the potential for this amplification by drawing on the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework. This framework, a product of policy analysis and public sector performance evaluation scholarship undertaken at the Ostrom Workshop, offers a metatheoretical approach to understanding diverse institutions in which the normative value of democratic self-governance is paramount. Information and, more generally, language are among the core features of the framework, as are individual decision-makers' (officials and ordinary participants alike) capacities (e.g., legal, social, economic, positions, and capabilities) and the distribution of outcomes (e.g., costs and benefits) from the decisions under study. While the framework makes no assumptions about the veracity of information in use or the homogeneity of capacities or equality of disbursed costs or benefits, the normative goals of democratic self-governance emphasize the necessity of warrantable information claims and the adverse effects of fixed inequalities, whether concerning decision-making authority or distributions of a policy's costs and benefits. Regarding authority, fixed inequalities suggest an unlimited capacity to

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dominate; fixed inequalities in the distribution of costs or benefits may indicate normative harms – injustice – and policy failures.

We start by examining the place of information and inequality in the IAD framework. We then discuss the differences between policy *framing* and more aggressive forms of *misinformation* and *disinformation*, and how they relate to trust. Next, we review the negative relationship between socioeconomic inequality and trust, identifying a number of potential mechanisms linking the two. We conclude by suggesting that mis- and disinformation exacerbate the challenges of democratic self-government not only on their own but also through its interactions with inequality and (dis)trust.

IAD FRAMEWORK: INFORMATION AND INEQUALITY

In 1982, Larry Kiser and Elinor Ostrom described what they called a "metatheoretical synthesis of institutional approaches." Their picture of "three worlds of action," the arenas of operational, collective, and constitutional choices, offered a foundational frame for understanding these distinct levels of analysis, each characterized by a set of "working parts" generally found in any theoretical explanation: attributes of (1) individual decision-makers (e.g., participants of varying positions and associated capacities to act in a given situation); (2) events (e.g., goods, services or collective acts to be produced or consumed); (3) communities affected by the decision; (4) institutions (e.g., rules and norms) guiding individual choices; and (5) the decision situation in which choices are made (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982, p. 58). The authors suggested that these broad domains of the kinds of variables contained in institutional theories could be used to explain two main phenomena: the actions and strategies of decision-makers and the aggregated results of their activities. The picture of cause and effect was "meta" in that any theory might be described in this way, since the framework covered the general elements found in any and all specific theories of diverse institutions. In the same year, Vincent Ostrom wrote "Institutional Analysis, Policy Analysis, and Performance Evaluation" as an extension of his earlier work on the normative contexts and limitations of institutions. These working papers became the basis of the IAD framework, a widely used approach to policy analysis.

Information and the IAD Framework

Vincent Ostrom's scholarship, particularly, offered a critique and correction to traditional policy analysis through an institutional analysis that turned to constitutional choice and the broader problem of language, itself understood as an institution, as a basis for rule-ordered relations. Indeed, Kiser and Ostrom (1982) started their discussion of a meta-framework of institutional analysis by amplifying Vincent Ostrom's (1982) insights about the uncertainties produced by our reliance on

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language to create and implement policies that are mere instructions, often with little guidance or metrics for goal achievement.

The ever-present problem of imprecise language is one among many communication failures at the heart of social dilemmas. Language, as Vincent Ostrom pointed out, using the terminology of John Searle (1969), is an "institutional fact." Language depends not only on shared understandings but also on the choices we make in constituting and using (humanly created) rules for articulating our individual experiences. The creation of shared understanding presumes a common desire to come to mutually beneficial conceptions of cause and effect. While language and knowledge may be imperfect, the common aim of fallible humans presumably involves a choice to pursue more, rather than less, accurate representations of "brute facts" – the facts of our physical existence. At every step in the effort to articulate what an individual makes of experiencing "brute facts," and what the audience takes from this articulation, lie the many traps of misunderstanding, ranging from mere mistakes to intentionally false representations. Nevertheless, the assumption made in the IAD approach to policy analysis is that a self-governing people have a stake in correcting errors rather than amplifying the consequences of their mistakes.

This assumption is neither naive nor ignorant of the fact that individuals may gain advantage not only by acceptable strategies of contextualizing information – framing – but also by misrepresentation. In appraising the vulnerabilities of democracy, V. Ostrom (1997) detailed the uses of Orwellian rhetorical strategies of "doublespeak" and deceptive "glittering generalities" (V. Ostrom, 1982), staples in political discourses. The many studies of self-managed commons (e.g., E. Ostrom, 1990) document the capacities of communities to come to a shared understanding in facing collective choice dilemmas – and the consequences of failing to do so. Effective, self-managed commons generally use highly participatory, egalitarian strategies for reaching these understandings. Democratic self-governance requires striving for accurate representations of cause and effect. Or, put another way, assuming the opposite – that we strive to dissemble and deceive – is a nonstarter for self-governance. By assuming fallibility and a capacity for learning, the question becomes one of the institutional arrangements that promote a drive for accuracy, including corrections to misinformation, and policies that foster trust in constitutional and collective choices and outcomes.

In the IAD framework, information, as well as its availability and accuracy, reflect the foundational dilemmas posed by human fallibility, particularly our limitations when it comes to producing shared understandings, given the institutional fact, language. The IAD framework sets out information as a feature of policy decisions in two ways. First, the constraints bounding and motivating choice and action focus on the characteristics of an action situation governed by eight types of rules, including "information rules, that specify channels of communication among actors and what information must, may, or must not be shared" (E. Ostrom, 2010, p. 810). Second, information about the decision at hand, the participants and their capacities, the

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expected effects of a decision, the measurement and evaluation of these effects influence actions in the arena of choice designated as the "action situation," which is the core of the IAD framework.

Prior to these worlds of action is a world of ideas; Vincent Ostrom argued that constitutional choice is preceded by the public articulation of values and beliefs that may be called "epistemic choice" (V. Ostrom, 1993). These shared understandings include an agreed-upon framework of inquiry, for example; orientations to our ways of evaluating choices and their effects; values such as respect, reciprocity, and fairness; and, germane to this chapter, beliefs about the degree of equality, inequality, liberty, and so forth. Misinformation, disinformation, and inequality not only affect our desire to coordinate, cooperate – or even compete – in a shared Action Arena but, indeed, to continue to believe in shared standards of value, or even conceptions of biophysical existence.

The concept of an action situation allows researchers to identify the variables generic to policymaking about any type of good or service. Empirical investigations using the framework revealed design principles conducive to well-functioning, sustainable self-managed communities (E. Ostrom, 1990).[1] More broadly, the framework can help us compare institutional arrangements, with a focus on a diversity of variables (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982; E. Ostrom, 2010). In the generic framework, "the amount of information available to a participant," is among the relevant structural elements of the action situation. While not explicitly stated, the term "amount" necessarily exceeds "quantity," to cover the quality, scope, scale, and accuracy of information as well.

Likewise, the framework does not assume perfect information, but it necessarily assumes a desire to improve the accuracy of information. The motivation to improve (minimally, to abandon behaviors that do not produce desirable outcomes) can be seen in Ostrom's (2005) discussion of the action situation:

> Within a particular situation, individuals can attempt to choose only in light of their beliefs about the opportunities and constraints of that situation. In an open society, individuals may be able eventually to affect the structure of action situations in which they repeatedly find themselves by changing the rule configurations affecting the structure of these situations. To do so, they move to deeper analytical levels (collective-choice or constitutional-choice action situations) where the outcomes generated are changes in the rules of other action situations. (p. 33)

We underscore the variability that language and, more generally, ideation, brings to the framework and the implications for taking action to move to "deeper analytical

[1] Ostrom's design principles (1990) are clear group boundaries, rules of governance match local conditions, those affected by the rule can participate in rule amendment procedures, self-organizing capacities recognized by outside authorities, local monitoring procedures, graduated sanctions for rule violators, accessible low-cost means of dispute resolution, and nested enterprises.

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levels" to affect beneficial changes. The framework assumes that an open society can pursue accurate information, and that we ask about the motivation and effectiveness of that pursuit. Framing, misinformation, and disinformation emerge as specific concerns in treating information in the IAD framework. Differences of many kinds may lead to individuals existing in diverse circumstances but the basis of collective action assumes capacities to enter arenas of action characterized by at least a minimal degree of common ground. In a context of disinformation, heterogeneities, including inequalities, may inhibit the comity required for constitutional and collective choice and action, and, more fundamentally, the epistemic choices preceding the three arenas of action.

Inequality and the IAD Framework

Research has focused on the heterogeneity of motives and resources in collective action situations as these diversities characterize the positions and consequent actions of decision-makers in the IAD framework. Early theoretical work considered the potential for highly motivated individuals with greater resources to provide common goods, even if they contributed more than those with fewer resources (Olson, 1965). Heterogeneity often characterizes the endowments of resource users, yielding several types of inequalities, including social, political, and economic inequalities (Andersson & Agrawal, 2006). Most of the research engaging the IAD framework and heterogeneities of actors concern the governance of common-pool resources. In studies of collective actions to secure natural resources (or produce their protection through allocation decisions), there is some support for the hypothesis that participants with greater resources may be willing to contribute a larger share of the initial costs of a management regime in exchange for a greater share of the benefits (Baland & Platteau, 1999). More generally, economic and status inequalities have also been associated with unequal political power (Neupane, 2003), lower levels of trust in the decision-making methods as well as the decisions themselves (Ruttan, 2006), lower levels of commitment, and decreased capacities for monitoring implemented policies (Schlager & Blomquist, 1998), that undermine cooperation and collective action. Experiments in common-pool resource management show that communication is vital to producing efficient resource use but heterogeneities among actors (e.g., differences in resources enabling contributions to collective action) impede self-governance (Hackett, Schlager, & Walker, 1994); inequalities likewise impede communication across groups, often a necessary condition for collective action (E. Ostrom, 2005).

Heterogeneities are ubiquitous and may be found in each element of the IAD framework, including rules governing contributions (who pays) and allocation rules (who benefits). In addition to helping researchers create a taxonomy of solutions to commons dilemmas created by myriad heterogeneities, the IAD framework alerts us to information asymmetries (including the effects of misinformation) and their

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relationship to economic, social, and political inequalities. Heterogeneities, asymmetries in information, and limited communication also impede trust among groups of different statuses. Related to the emphasis on open communication and warrantable claims is the overall necessity of credible commitments that lead to cooperative actions over several iterations. As people see the outcome of their choices and know the choices and actions of others, trust becomes increasingly possible. It turns out that trust is a major component in surmounting the obstacles that heterogeneities raise (e.g., E. Ostrom, 2005).

INFORMATION FRAMING, MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND TRUST

Information "framing" most generally means putting information into a context and has long been accepted as a legitimate rhetorical strategy: Credible contextualization and analysis are staples of journalism. Aristotle's "rhetorical triangle" of pathos (frames engaging belief, value, experience, imagination, and feelings), logos (appeals to reason and logic), and ethos (appeals using authoritative, credible sources) mark normatively acceptable strategies of persuasive speech. Framing and appeals to feelings and imagination may be acceptable when linked to the other sides of the metaphorical triangle. But framing, in this logic has generally referred to accurate, truthful information. Disinformation and misinformation bring us to a different place in the deployment of affective rhetorical strategies.

Framing and Framing Effects

Over the fifty years of its evolution as a concept crossing a broad array of scientific disciplines, "framing" has come to indicate many different, albeit occasionally related, phenomena. In communications theory, political psychology, media studies, and related disciplines, the term "framing" has been used to indicate ways of organizing information and social realities (Cowart, Blackstone, & Riley, 2022; Goffman, 1974), types of narrative and their effects (Bennett, 2016; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), and efforts or means of influencing opinion and choices by directing attention toward some consequences, risks, benefits, or values and away from other plausible concerns (Chong, 2000; Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Druckman, 2001, 2004; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

Framing effects occur when "logically equivalent (but not transparently equivalent) statements of a problem lead decision makers to choose different options" (Rabin, 1998, p. 36). In initial research on framing effects, for example, Tversky and Kahneman (1981, 1986) showed that framing the expected consequences of a choice in terms of a chance of loss rather than the logically equivalent chance of gain caused participants in their experiments to take the riskier of two options; framed as a chance for gain, the safer bet was the dominant choice. In political communication,

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"comparability" rather than "logical equivalence" may better describe the various considerations influencing choices (Chong & Druckman, 2007b): Framing effects occur when the contextualization of information elevates some considerations – including principles and values – over others. For example, Druckman (2001) finds either of two valued principles, freedom or security, may be highlighted by framing and used as the basis of a policy choice. Experiments on the effects of news narrative styles show how framing influences attributions of responsibility for public problems as either the fault of the government, or of the person who is featured as an example of the social concern (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987); news broadcasters overwhelmingly hew to the latter narrative style (Allen et al. 2023; Stevens et al. 2006).

Framing also makes an appeal to our emotional intelligence, but absent logic or source credibility, the resulting appeals cross a line into propaganda and may be perceived as unsound. Indeed, weak frames (generally those lacking value or logical relevance) demonstrably fail to influence decisions and in some cases increase the efficacy of strong frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). Source credibility can constrain the use of frames to manipulate public opinion (Druckman, 2001), but the credibility of the source matters most when message recipients lack either prior knowledge or preexisting attitudes toward the message topic (Kumkale, Albarracín, & Seignourel, 2010). Early work in framing effects broadly assumed the veracity of the information to be framed and investigated the effects of placing truthful information into various contexts. In an online context, "message credibility" is a result of evaluations of source credibility, the message frame, and social endorsement (Borah & Xiao, 2018). This research suggests that the veracity of information is perhaps only one of the many factors influencing perceptions of message credibility, although truthfulness remains a critical dimension in distinguishing framing from misinformation and disinformation as well as our analysis of the effects of each rhetorical style.

Misinformation and Disinformation Definitions and Dimensions

It might seem that the definitions of misinformation and disinformation are self-evident, but our excursion into the meaning and effects of framing signals that matters are more complex. We start our discussion of information, by focusing on the well-researched topic of news representations and the conception of "fake news" and suggesting that much of the theorizing in this area of communication studies can be applied to discussion of "information" more broadly. Fake news is a term that has recently been appropriated by office holders in the United States as meaning simply information with which the official disagrees. Here, we consider the attributes described by Newman et al. (2017, p. 20), writing for the annual Reuters Digital Report: Information invented for the purpose of discrediting others or for monetary gain (e.g., "clickbait") or news with a basis in fact that is spun to fit a particular agenda. Martens et al. (2018) discuss information that is suspect because of

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its source, its dissemination method, and its intention, while the European Union (EU) Commission for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (2018) similarly describes fake news as disinformation: "false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is designed, presented, and promoted" for profit or to cause intentional public harm (p. 3). In contrast to the characteristics of fake news, Newman et al. (2017) measure consumer perceptions of four qualities sought in online news: information of high accuracy and reliability, enabling better understanding of complex issues, communicating strong viewpoints and opinions, and providing entertaining content.

Unpacking these definitions reveals several dimensions to be used in evaluating information, with two that stand out in much of the literature: purpose and truthfulness. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) focus on these dimensions to define three terms: misinformation as false information, where no harm is meant; disinformation as false information knowingly shared to cause harm; and mal-information as factual information shared to cause harm (e.g., doxing, disclosing private information in public forums to enable harm). The purpose of distributing the information is central to these definitions in which intentions to deceive, harm, or profit signal disinformation, exempting errors (which news outlets make and correct), satire, parody, and partisan commentary from this category. The idea of combining mistakes, parody, and partisan news spin in one category deserves greater scrutiny.

The broader definition of misinformation allows for framing, "spin," and ideological slant as a matter of consumer trust in a news brand. The Reuters' definition of quality news insists that news outlets meet consumers' expectations of a given editorial slant and partisan perspective, framing, and filtering of information in reporting. Filtering and slanting news to establish a commercial position in a news market is expected, and consumers want to be presented with the topics, types, slants, and agendas – partisan, ideological, and so on – that they intended to buy when tuning in or clicking on (Martens et al., 2018). Following this broad view of news products, we can imagine misinformation and disinformation on these continua (see Figure 14.1).

In contrast, the narrow view of misinformation confines the definition of misinformation to the misrepresentation of facts such as omissions and additions that mislead and outright lies. Recent work on US voters' responses to political advertising (Allen & Stevens, 2019; Stevens et al., 2008) and news coverage of elections (Allen et al., 2007) show that inaccurate claims in political advertising along with news framing influence voter attitudes toward candidates and voter participation in elections (Stevens et al., 2006). Inaccurate political advertising claims not only result in inaccurate understandings of candidates' issue positions but also lead to more general confusion about policies, candidates' partisanship and ideologies, and the issues that are targets of the false claims (Allen & Stevens, 2019). Distrust of politics and news media increase the likelihood that news consumers will believe online mis- or disinformation (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020).

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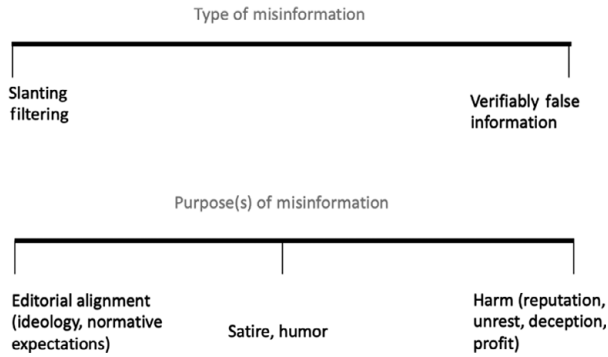


FIGURE 14.1 Misinformation continua – purpose and accuracy

Critics of fact-checking (e.g., Park et al., 2021) show how evidence that is open to interpretation or claims that seem to elude evidentiary evaluations encourage information spin on the part of fact-checkers themselves. Building on research studying partisan perceptions of ad claim accuracy and fairness (Allen & Stevens, 2015; Allen et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2008), Allen and Stevens (2019) offered two measures of claim accuracy: an absolute measure of the accuracy of each ad claim (accurate or not) and an evaluation of the degree of accuracy specifying truthfulness on a scale ranging as follows – a wholly accurate representation of facts, majority accurate representation of facts, and/or inferences drawn logically from facts, mildly misleading from a factual basis, omissions and misleading representation of facts, major distortions with little clear basis in facts, gross untruths (i.e., lies).

Efforts to combat lies in political communication do not correct misinformation (Allen et al., 2016; Allen & Stevens, 2019; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) and may in fact cause decision-makers to double down and hew to errant information that comports with a preexisting bias (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). In the United States, motivated information processing driven mainly by partisanship led significantly more Republicans than Democrats to reject reports of independent fact-checkers stating that the advertising claims of their favored candidate was false (Allen et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2008). It may be that these partisan differences are associated with diminished trust in news media, particularly fact-checkers, in an increasingly polarized political climate.

Trust in News Media, Institutions, and Support for Democracy

Trust in news media, worldwide, has indeed declined from 2015 to 2023 (Newman et al., 2023). In the United States, trust in news media declined significantly between 2018 and 2022 and, while recovering to 2015 levels, remains in the bottom half of forty-six democratic countries whose citizens were surveyed in YouGov polling. Worldwide, around 40 percent of respondents say they "trust most news most of

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the time" (p. 10). Social media information sources are viewed as generally less trustworthy than traditional news platforms; news consumers have grown increasingly skeptical of algorithm-based information selection. Although news consumers generally trust social media less than traditional news media as an information source, trust in social media has been gaining on traditional news media, especially in younger generations (Liedke & Gottfried, 2022). Data from this time period document the rising anxiety caused by misinformation (Newman & Fletcher, 2017), a trend that has continued along with record high distrust of algorithm-driven news in the post-pandemic media environment (Newman et al., 2023). While news consumers say they value reliable branding (e.g., ideological orientations) in news analysis, "bias, spin, and agendas" are the main causes of distrust in news media (Newman & Fletcher, 2017, p. 5).

Distrust of social media as an information source appears to influence attitudes toward news media in general. In a twenty-six-country survey conducted between 2016 and 2019, Park et al. (2020) show that increased accesses to news through social media is linked to a decline in trust in media. Other spillover effects of social media use are also well documented by evidence that internet use increases voter uncertainty (Sudulich, Wall, & Baccini, 2015), partisan polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2023), as well as eroding trust in institutions and politics (Kiratli, 2023).

Recent work indicates that support for democratic norms and prodemocracy candidates for office is in decline in Europe and the United States (Bartels, 2020; Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Drutman, Goldman, & Diamond, 2020; Foa & Mounk, 2017). In the United States, this erosion of support for democracy is shown in a greater than 20 percent drop in those agreeing that democracy "is better than any other form of government," over the thirteen years from 2006 to 2019, and a decline from 75 percent to 62 percent between 1995 and 2017 of those rejecting a political system headed by a "strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections" (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). As survey research shows, support for democracy appears to be in decline, while electoral support for illiberal candidates for office appears on the assent (e.g., Cohen et al., 2022), not, perhaps, as a move against democratic norms, per se, but simply because voters' policy preferences converge with those stated by antidemocratic candidates (Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2022). In experimental research (Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2022) and survey research (Rydgren, 2008) in Germany, these preferences converged on the topic of immigration, an issue that has been the focus of considerable disinformation on social media (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In the United States, partisanship is associated with lower support for democratic norms, which include greater belief in the illegitimacy of the 2020 election results among Republicans than among Democrats as well as a higher percentage of Republicans than Democrats who support the former president refusing to vacate the office based on these claims (Drutman, Goldman, & Diamond, 2020).

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The weakening attachment to democratic norms and institutions is strongest among younger citizens (e.g., Foa & Mounk, 2017). Research suggests this trend is not a function of life cycle effects in which youthfulness accounts for a cohort's skepticism of democracy, with the expectation that attachments to this form of government grow with age and experience. Rather, younger generations seem less inclined to support democratic norms, institutions, or candidates (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). In the United States, this decline occurs across each age cohort since World War II.

Younger cohorts are also those who are more likely to avoid news altogether (Eddy, 2022). Reasons for avoiding news consumption include not only disinterest but also concerns for mental well-being and avoidance of caustic, divisive political debates and perspectives with which the consumer disagrees (Newman et al., 2023). News avoidance is a matter of partisan preferences. In the United States, 70 percent of right-leaning news consumers avoid social justice news, while 64 percent avoid climate change and environmental news, for example, while avoidance of these topics among left-leaning news media users is 22 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Reported avoidance among left-leaning consumers of crime and personal security news is 30 percent, compared to 14 percent of right-leaning news users, and 25 percent of left-leaning respondents report avoiding news of business, financial, and economic activities, compared to 9 percent of right-leaning respondents (Newman et al., 2023). The online media landscape has also changed news consumption patterns, particularly in younger age cohorts. Instead of accessing news through such platforms as Facebook or Twitter (now known as X), where mainstream journalists lead news conversations, video-led networks such as TikTok have emerged as an information medium of choice for consumers under thirty-five years old. Coupled with the decline in voice among mainstream news organizations on X, the "new, new media" of TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat is the domain of influencers (Newman et al., 2023). From celebrities to sports personalities, views of policies, wars, and current events vie with news analysts for attention and credibility.

No definitive statement of cause can be taken from these patterns, but the trend approaching the eve of the U.S. General Elections and EU Parliamentary Elections in 2024 can be summarized: Increased misinformation, disinformation, and anxieties about discerning fact and fiction join decreased trust in news organizations, institutions, and government; support for democracy and prodemocracy candidates; and engagement with news, particularly among partisans seeking to avoid topics and viewpoints with which they disagree and, more broadly, younger cohorts. These trends are associated with increased polarization of viewpoints in the United States, as is the ascendance of misinformation and disinformation, generally.

We began this discussion by observing that no one thinks that the "information" influencing policy choices is perfect or that all participants in policymaking will adhere to norms of truth, including making warrantable claims. Nevertheless, we

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suggested the importance, if not necessity, of assuming a general orientation to truth-seeking rather than lie-mongering for the survival of democratic processes. Our look into the practice, prevalence, and consequences of lies supports this conjecture. We now turn to a second trend in politics, increasing inequality, which also hampers policymaking efforts in democracies.

INEQUALITIES AND TRUST: SUSTAINING DEMOCRACY

Socioeconomic inequality is one of the primary sources of heterogeneity in actors' resources and motivations, making the increase in income and wealth inequality important attributes of actors in the IAD framework – and of concern to the framework's underlying social theory. Just as some level of truth-seeking is necessary for the survival of democratic processes, so is trust in those processes. Growing levels of inequality may lead to lower levels of social and political trust (e.g., Bienstman, Hense, & Gangl, 2024; Bobzien, 2023), jeopardizing such core IAD principles as claim warrantability and truth-seeking. If neither participants nor processes can be trusted, an Orwellian world of "double speak" (2003 [1949]) signals a critical vulnerability of democracies (V. Ostrom, 1997).

Trust can be placed in many politically relevant objects and constructs, with political trust and social trust serving as two primary dimensions of analysis. Political trust captures the trust that people have in institutions such as governments, politicians, the legal system, and parties. Goubin and Hooghe (2020) view political trust as capturing the latent concept of political legitimacy, a necessary condition for democratic governments that rely on voluntary adherence to rules and shared norms to maintain social order. Social trust denotes the belief that "most people" (i.e., the broad group of people not personally known in a society) can be trusted. The concept can extend to related beliefs about whether most people try to be fair or try to be helpful most of the time. Drawing from the vast literature on political and social trust (Uslaner, 2018), we focus specifically on the links between inequality and each dimension of trust.

Inequality also exists along multiple dimensions such as income, wealth, or social status. These dimensions can be conceptualized and gauged objectively using measures like the Gini coefficient or through a subjective measure such as perceptions of inequality or normative beliefs about the fairness of inequality. Economically rich democracies have witnessed remarkable changes in income and wealth inequality over the past three decades. While income inequality dominated the discourse in the second half of the twentieth century, it is wealth inequality that increasingly takes center stage today. Housing equity is a primary determinant of cross-national differences in wealth inequality (Pfeffer & Waitkus, 2021). While wealth comes in many forms for the richest, for most people it comes in the form of housing, where wealth is increasingly concentrated among high-income households (Dewilde & Flynn, 2021). A global real estate firm recently put the scope of

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housing wealth into perspective: The value of global real estate is larger than global equities and debt securities combined, and three-quarters of that value is in residential real estate (Savills News, 2023). The relevance of housing to wealth inequality extends particularly to younger generations who are locked out of housing markets, and who increasingly rely more on their parents than governments for resources (Flynn, 2020; Flynn & Schwartz, 2017). Such re-familialization has important policy implications, especially given the role of governments in redistributing resources and risk through social policy.

Inequality can also exist at various levels of the individual, regional, national, or even the supranational tier. Inequalities in resource distribution in any of these often-nested arenas may have an impact on social or political trust. For researchers studying the relationship between either dimension of trust and inequality, the different levels of experience produce diverse forms of the inequality–trust nexus, and diverse scholarly views of the mechanisms driving the identified relationships.

Inequality and Political Trust

Income inequality is commonly measured at the national level, and scholars focused on the United States or Europe have found that a relationship between income inequality and political trust exists across countries and over time (Bienstman, 2023; Bienstman, Hense, & Gangl, 2024; Bobzien, 2023). Studies that fail to find a relationship between *income* inequality and political trust often instead find a relationship between *social* inequality and political trust (e.g., Kim et al., 2022). These results point to the importance of adopting a broad understanding of both forms of inequality.

People are situated in smaller regional subunits and larger supranational units, and inequality at these levels is also associated with political trust; these levels are nested, leading to interrelated assessments of trust in relevant institutions. Researchers find that both income inequality and regional wealth inequality affect trust in national institutions and in the EU. At the micro-level, lower levels in inequality correspond to higher levels of trust in national institutions; higher levels of inequality similarly depress trust in the EU, a so-called extrapolation effect. At the macro-level, countries with high inequality have lower levels of national trust, a situation that can prompt individuals to place their trust outside national institutions, a so-called compensation effect that corresponds to higher levels of EU trust (Lipps & Schraff, 2021). Regional wealth differences may have an additional impact. Economically vibrant urban areas may see more visible EU infrastructure development that prompts more trust than poorer areas where people consider themselves left behind (Lipps & Schraff, 2021). This relationship may not be linear, with regions in the middle of the wealth distribution less trusting of the EU than poorer or richer regions (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2023).

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What drives such relationships between socioeconomic inequality and political trust? Important factors can exist at the individual level – individual income or individual characteristics like social status – or can be more sociotropic in nature (Bienstman, 2023; Kim et al., 2022). The latter refers to the context in which a person lives (including social norms concerning relationships and autonomy) and its ability to affect the effects of inequality on trust, independent from the impact of any individual characteristics. People can respond to inequality in either a rational, evaluative manner or through a more affective social–psychological response (or some degree of each cognitive style) (Bienstman, Hense, & Gangl, 2024; Goubin & Hooghe, 2020, Greenwood-Hau, 2021). When evaluating degrees of inequality through either rational–evaluative or social–psychological channels, a person's perception of inequality, rather than the actual distribution of inequality, may more accurately predict trust levels (Bobzien, 2023; Scheidegger & Staerklé, 2011). Lower levels of political trust are associated with higher gaps between inequality perceptions and preferences (Bobzien, 2023). Scheidegger and Staerklé (2011) find that it is not objective markers like income, but subjective markers like the perception of being at material risk that affect threats to the social order (including the threat that inequality could bring), which in turn affects political trust.

At first glance, the logic for an evaluative mechanism emphasizing individual socioeconomic characteristics seems straightforward. Whether inequality is a matter of perception or a matter of facts (i.e., Gini index based), people evaluate whether the current system works for them, and those who evaluate the system more positively will be more likely to trust the institutions that create the system. This reasoning implies that high-income individuals – who stand to benefit the most from inequality – are the most trusting. A closer look shows several potential caveats to this formulation, given the diverse criteria that define the system that "works for them."

Greenwood-Hau (2021) emphasizes that people can attribute inequality to structural reasons such as government policy, or to individual reasons such as hard work, positing that those who emphasize reasons like hard work are more likely to have system-justifying beliefs. The study finds that people who attribute inequality to government policies (that benefit high-income workers) have lower levels of political trust. Bienstman et al. (2023) similarly find that citizens' trust in government is predicated on their evaluation of government policy and performance, with inequality as one outcome used in that evaluation. The study also finds support for a "process-based evaluation" whereby inequality affects people's belief that they can influence the political process, and this sense of external (in)efficacy influences trust.

Sociotropic explanations of the inequality–trust link contend that the criteria for evaluating a given context include values and beliefs, for instance, regarding the moral acceptability of high inequality (Goubin & Hooghe, 2020). Social–psychological explanations maintain that such individual attributes as status anxiety, or even social trust, lead to more visible status differences in a high-inequality society, thereby lowering trust in institutions.

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These individual and sociotropic explanations all advance an evaluative logic. Each account also helps explain the otherwise puzzling finding that someone in an economically advantageous position in a high-inequality society nevertheless has lower levels of political trust. In this case, a person may employ a notion of social justice, judging the morality of high inequality in their society and adjusting their trust in government accordingly (Goubin & Hooghe, 2020). Bienstman (2023) finds support for both sociotropic explanations. Individuals living in countries with greater inequality have lower trust in democratic institutions, regardless of their own socioeconomic status. Although social–psychological characteristics affect levels of political trust, this research finds that evaluation-based processes (e.g., a performance evaluation based on the individual's expectations and preferences and the regime's economic performance) better explain the link between inequality and political trust.

The link between socioeconomic inequality and political trust is confirmed in many studies and empirically supported through plausible accounts featuring either individual characteristics or sociotropic orientations as the main explanation. The association between inequality and political trust is complex, with perceived institutional performance (expectations and evaluations), values, and beliefs about equality and social justice mediating the relationship between these two terms. Examining the contextual and social–psychological sides of the relationship encourages us to pinpoint just exactly what kind of information and beliefs people have in mind when they think about inequality.

Inequality and Social Trust

Researchers accept the near-consensus finding of a relationship between inequality and political trust, moving on to consider explanatory mechanisms for this link. In contrast, scholars currently debate the nature, scope, and scale of the inequality–social trust relationship. Much of the social trust research emphasizes the difference between analyses conducted at the regional level versus the national level, and differences when using objective measures of inequality such as the Gini index versus subjective measures.

Scholars regularly measure social trust (stated also as interpersonal trust or generalized trust) with either a one-item scale asking whether most people can be trusted, or a three-item scale additionally including whether most people try to be fair and whether most of the time people try to be helpful (Hastings, 2018; Kanitsar, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Knell & Stix, 2021; Olivera, 2015; Stephany, 2017). Using these measures, researchers have found lower levels of social trust correlate with high-income inequality, especially when making the comparison across countries (see Buttrick & Oishi, 2017 for a review).

As with the nexus of inequality and political trust, the relationship of social trust and inequality is complex. Fairbrother and Martin (2013) show that inequality has

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increased while social trust has declined between 1970 and 2002 in all US states, but states (and counties) with the greatest increase in inequality have not shown a significantly greater loss of social trust. Similarly, in a study using panel data from thirty-two EU countries, Olivera (2015) confirms the conventional relationship between social trust and inequality, but also shows that country-specific factors including institutions and culture, discrimination, and ethnic and linguistic fractionalization may play a bigger role than growing income inequality in explaining declining social trust.

Testing a claim put forward in a review by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), Kanitsar (2022) confirms that the relationship between income inequality and social trust exists at the cross-national level but not at the regional level within countries. Using US tax return data at the state level, Hastings (2018) similarly finds no evidence for the state-level relationship, but some evidence that an overtime increase in inequality correlates with a decline in trust. Using large, cross-national surveys, Kim et al. (2022) find that social class is a better predictor of social trust than income inequality at the regional level. These studies all use Gini coefficients as their measure of income inequality. Studies emphasizing perceptions of inequality more consistently find a relationship between inequality and social trust (Gallego, 2016; Larsen, 2013; Loveless, 2013).

Larsen (2013) finds that social trust increased in socially democratic welfare states of Denmark and Sweden in the three decades leading up to 2010, but declined in the liberal welfare states of the United Kingdom and United States. Larsen attributes these changes to cognitive perceptions of inequality. In the United Kingdom and the United States, people began to perceive others as more likely to be in the "bottom" of society with untrustworthy, undeserving, or dangerous personas. Conversely, people in Denmark and Sweden formed perceptions of others in the "middle" of society with trusting and deserving personas.

Perceptions of inequality have also continued to play an important role in theory building. Knell and Stix (2021) argue that when responding to survey questions about "most people" (the wording of social trust questions), respondents will use a reference group that may be biased in some way, and which can only be captured by using direct measures of perceptions of inequality as opposed to calculations that are based on the actual income distribution. To capture perceptions of inequality, Stephany (2017) uses age-specific Gini coefficients and finds that the relationship between income inequality and trust does extend to within-country regions, where it can be attenuated or intensify based on the spread of the age-specific indicators. This finding offers a promising line of study connecting objective and subjective measures of inequality. In sum, the research on inequality and social trust generally points to a relationship, but the boundaries of that relationship are still under review. Differences in findings are often explained by measurement differences, with many emphasizing the importance of perceptions. This review brings us full circle, pointing to the key role that information – shared understandings, perceptions, beliefs, and framing – plays in policymaking and democratic self-governance.

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INFORMATION AND INEQUALITY AS AMPLIFYING FACTORS

Growing inequality and growing misinformation are two major trends in contemporary democracies. Both act as depressive forces on trust and confidence in democratic institutions. The research on the misinformation–trust link and the inequality–trust link are in separate fields, but there are reasons to expect that misinformation might amplify the corrosive effects of inequality on trust. We suggest two such amplification channels, linking each back to the IAD framework and noting their policy relevance with respect to social policy as an important equalizing policy tool.

First, high levels of inequality are thought to lead to less social mixing, more insular groups, and more cursory interactions with those beyond a given socioeconomic circle. As the logic goes, fewer and more cursory interactions lead to decreased trust. Second, perceptions and beliefs around inequality are just as important as the actual distribution of inequality.

The studies that demonstrate these two paths offer a departure from Robert Putnam's (2000) thesis that social trust is conditioned on civic associations and volunteering; Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) argue, in contrast, that inequality is the important factor. In fact, in Hochschild's (2016) sociological study of a community in Louisiana that is plagued by the effects of fracking yet distrusts regulators, political institutions in general, and mainstream news media, she finds highly participatory, yet insular, groups. Her interviews show individuals attuned to media brands and political leaders that support their worldview, reinforcing their distrust and detachment from other social groups.

It is a kind of activism and engagement that democratic theorist Tocqueville describes as collective individualism (Allen, 2005). As Vasilopoulou and Talving (2023) point out, people living in place-based communities share experiences and take informational cues from one another. Income and especially wealth inequality likewise have important spatial dimensions. Growing income and wealth inequality, especially through its housing- and community-based dimensions, lead to increased insularity. The increased potential for insularity – as much as the conviviality that place-based groups are assumed to have – again points to the importance of communities and information, as highlighted in the IAD framework. Misinformation may reinforce or amplify this insularity: people may not only have fewer interactions with outsiders but also receive messaging with spin, ideological slant, or even verifiably false information about policies, ideologies, and the issues that are targets of false claims.

As more people hold incomplete or incorrect information, this condition may influence their perceptions of inequality levels or shift their tolerance, or intolerance, for inequality. Such effects may extend to more innocuous forms of framing. Initial evidence of the latter can be found in the Yellow Vest movement in France, where evidence exists that the historic collective framing of inequality, which is at

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odds with fundamental values of solidarity and equality, drives the movement (Jetten, Mols, & Selvanathan, 2020). Experimental evidence exists indicating that citizens trust institutions less when they are led to believe that there is greater inequality (Guinjoan & Rico, 2018). This research, too, points to the importance of information in potential processes of amplification.

These two potential amplification channels, along with the effects that both inequality and misinformation have on trust in democratic institutions, have important implications for social policy and the welfare state. As some have noted (e.g. Gärtner & Prado, 2016; Habibov, Cheung, & Auchynnikava, 2018), inequality and trust shape support for social policies, and inequality is associated with a decline in prosocial attitudes among the poor, an important target group of social policies (Gallego, 2016). In other words, support for the very policies designed to redistribute risk and promote greater equality may hinge on levels of inequality and trust, which themselves are at risk because of increased misinformation. People who do not interact, who receive their news from different sources, and who lack social and political trust may not only be less likely to support one another in interactions that necessitate collective action but also in supporting policies that would lead to greater risk sharing.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the IAD framework alerts us to the problems of distrust and disaffection from democracy that go far beyond the correction of misinformation and disinformation. Heterogeneities and inequalities teamed with disinformation may today prevent us from reaching collective agreement on the methods of discerning warrantable information, if we no longer share common understandings to enable a collective epistemic choice, or we now live in distinct epistemes (or all of these).

The methodologies of productive contestation and, broadly, individual and collective inquiry, deliberation, reflection, and choice as well as other aspects of the iterative learning and amendment process (action-outcome-observation-institutional development-action) found in the IAD framework are imperiled by disinformation and the erosion of trust in facts, social and political institutions, and fellow community members. What is to be done to defend democracy in an inequality-centric, digital age?

When it comes to information, in several US states and in the EU, various campaigns aim to educate children and adults in ways to spot spin, reporter error, and demonstrably false claims. In the EU and the United Kingdom, slander and libel laws put the onus on those making claims to warrant their validity, enabling regulations prohibiting false statements in, for example, election advertising, while in the United States, constitutionally protected political speech presently includes misleading and even false claims in political advertising (Allen & Stevens, 2019).

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The prevailing belief in the United States is that truth will prevail over falsehoods in an unregulated arena of public speech. Yet, the evidence is decidedly against this conventional view (Allen & Stevens, 2019).

Structural interventions in the United States will necessarily encounter challenges of First Amendment claims against the regulation of political speech. Yet, we suggest – particularly as artificial intelligence (AI)-generated manipulated images and manipulated speech emerge in social media and mainstream media commentary on this novel form of misinformation – regulation is necessary. EU high commissions have begun such policy investigations; in the United States, regulation is left to social media and cable news platforms.

Inequality, in turn, is both place-based and perception-based. This points to two fronts that need to be addressed. Policies in Europe and the United States have enabled and indeed encouraged the marketization and re-familialization of risk, which reinforce growing inequality trends. Such trends occur in communities through both employment sectors and housing markets (or in other words, both income and wealth), two policy areas where governments have introduced greater precarity instead of security. Increased precarity extends beyond low-income households and other socially marginalized groups who have always experienced it, to also include younger generations who have lived their entire lives during an era of state retreat. Policies must be redesigned to open more opportunities for locked-out groups, which almost certainly requires a stronger state role in re-pooling risk.

Given that cognitive perceptions of deservingness, trustworthiness, and fairness vary across countries, it is likely that some countries will meet greater resistance in this endeavor and have further to go in rebuilding trust. This points to the importance of supranational channels in encouraging risk sharing. The EU has indicated some willingness to move in this direction, including through the European Pillar of Social Rights and by further embedding social policy into the European Semester. However, such tools could be used to greater effect. In the United States, the idea of Franklin D. Roosevelts' second bill of rights – emphasizing the importance of social rights and risk pooling at the societal level – seems a far cry from current political rhetoric. The first step might be to consider the degree to which communities really are operating in distinct epistemes, and if so, at which action level trust rebuilding initiatives might have the best chance of taking hold.

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