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Disconcerted Public

Super election year 2024: Concerns about disinformation in Germany and the United States

Lukas Bernhard, Leonie Schulz, Cathleen Berger, Kai Unzicker
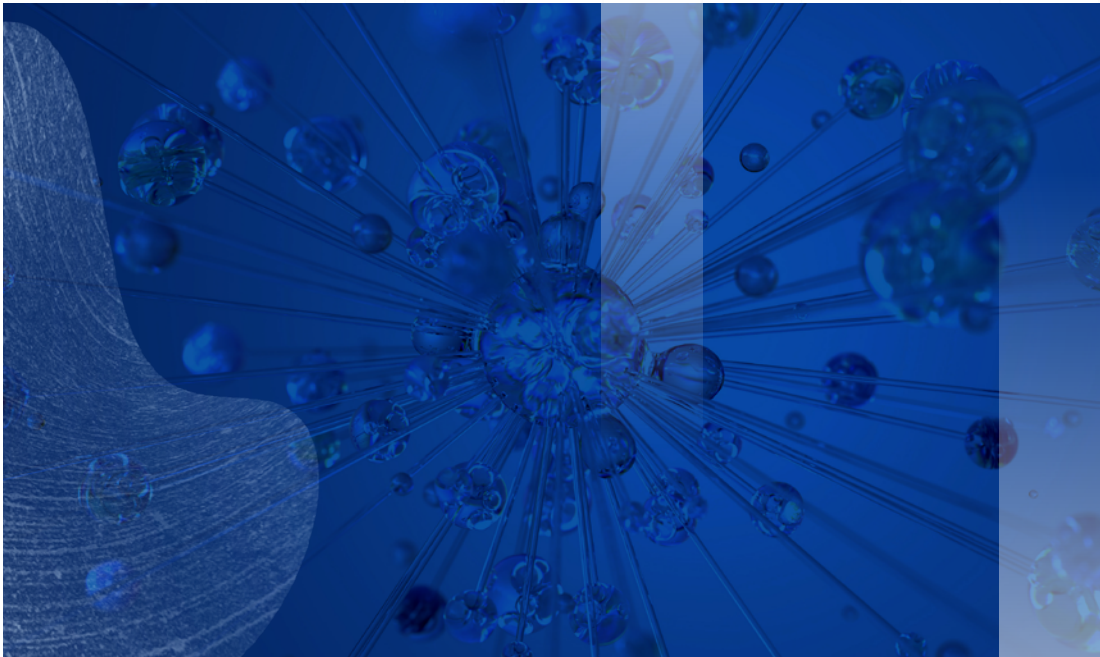
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Super election year 2024: Concerns about disinformation in Germany and the United States

Lukas Bernhard, Leonie Schulz, Cathleen Berger, Kai Unzicker

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Key findings

Germany

An overwhelming majority of Germans consider the spread of online disinformation to be a threat to democracy and social cohesion: The public has been sensitized to the challenges that disinformation poses to democracy. According to the survey data, 84 % of respondents consider disinformation on the internet to be a major or even very major problem for society. In addition, 81 % emphasized that disinformation constitutes a genuine problem and threat to social cohesion and democracy. Only a minority (13 %) stated that disinformation is just a term used to discredit alternative opinions or portray them as untrustworthy. More than half of those surveyed (54 %) believe that the issue of disinformation receives insufficient attention.

Respondents see disinformation as primarily intended to manipulate political opinion, influence elections and divide society: More than 90 % of respondents indicated that those disseminating disinformation have the goal of shaping the political opinions of the public. Similarly, large shares asserted that disinformation is meant to influence election outcomes (86 %) or divide society (84 %). However, opinions varied somewhat when respondents were asked about their concerns regarding the potential of disinformation to fulfill these goals. While 67 % expressed apprehension about the impact of disinformation on election results, 70 % perceived a moderately high to very high risk of others' opinions being influenced by disinformation. Notably, only 16 % reported being personally vulnerable to the effects of disinformation.

Nearly half of the respondents admitted to occasional uncertainty regarding the veracity of online information, with one-third reporting encounters with disinformation in recent months: Younger people are unsure of the truth of information more often than older people. People

with lower levels of trust in the media expressed greater skepticism toward online information. Overall, those using social media more frequently and intensively also tend to encounter disinformation more frequently than others. Men, younger demographics and people with high levels of educational attainment reported more frequent encounters with online disinformation. Similarly, individuals lacking trust in media sources were also more likely to report encountering disinformation online.

Disinformation is most frequently associated with controversial topics, such as immigration, health, warfare and elections: Respondents who reported recent encounters with disinformation identified "immigration and refugees" and "health and COVID-19" as the most frequent topics (53 % each). Additionally, "the war in Ukraine" (51 %), "politics and elections" (50 %), and "climate change and natural disasters" (47 %) were frequently cited as affected topics. In contrast, disinformation on topics such as "crime" (30 %) and "equality and feminism (17 %), were reported less frequently.

Respondents primarily attribute disinformation to sources within the political sphere: Two-thirds of the respondents identified "protest activists and groups" as key actors in disseminating of disinformation, followed by "bloggers and influencers" (60 %), "foreign governments" (53 %) and "politicians and parties in Germany" (50 %). Notably, 50 % of respondents consider an equal share of disinformation to originate domestically and internationally, while 24 % primarily blamed domestic actors for the spread of disinformation and 16 % blamed foreign actors. In terms of political orientation, 55 % perceive disinformation as originating from both the right and the left, while a quarter assign blame primarily to the political right and 10 % to the left.

Disinformation is most frequently perceived on social media networks, but blogs, news sites and messaging services also play a role in its dissemination: Among respondents who reported recent encounters with disinformation, over half cited social media platforms (59 %), whereas articles on news sites or blogs were mentioned by 37 % and messaging services by 19 %. Notably, TikTok, X / Twitter and Facebook were identified as prominent platforms where users encounter disinformation, with more than half of the respondents reporting such experiences. There are, however, notable differences between the messaging services: While WhatsApp users reported relatively fewer encounters with disinformation (11 %), Telegram users reported a significantly higher proportion (24 %). In addition, respondents with a low level of trust in the media and who otherwise perceive disinformation more frequently report encountering less disinformation on Telegram.

Around half of those surveyed verify information on the internet by carrying out their own research. To date, fact-checking services are not widely used: A total of 57 % of respondents stated that they have verified the truth of information on the internet by carrying out their own research. However, a significantly lower share (only 27 %) stated that they had reached out to the sender of a message for clarification, and only 12 % said that they had used fact-checking services. One-third of the respondents claimed that they had posted a comment or sent a message to notify another person that they were spreading false information. Furthermore, one-quarter of respondents disclosed reporting posts or accounts on social media that they suspected of disseminating disinformation.

Trust in media is a pivotal factor in dealing with disinformation: The study places significant emphasis on examining the level of trust that respondents have in the media, analyzing responses based on varying degrees of trust (high, medium, low). Respondents with low levels of trust in media tend to have a broader understanding of what qualifies as disinformation. They are more inclined to consider even unintentionally inaccurate reporting as a type of disinformation, and

they are more likely to believe that such reports are primarily intended to discredit alternative opinions. In addition to being more likely to have encountered disinformation (nearly half reported a recent encounter), they are more inclined to attribute disinformation to domestic actors, politicians, journalists and the German government. They are also more prone to suspect motives such as distracting attention from scandals or political incompetence.

In comparison to the United States

For the purposes of this study, some of the questions were also asked in the United States simultaneously. This enables a comparison of selected results between the two countries.

Uncertainty regarding the truthfulness of information is more pronounced in the United States, with U.S. citizens reporting more frequent encounters with disinformation: In the United States, a significantly higher share of respondents indicated that they were uncertain about the truthfulness of information (67 % / +22 percentage points compared to Germany), and a considerably higher share stated that they had recently encountered disinformation (61 % / +26 pp). Moreover, the perception of disinformation in the United States is characterized by greater polarization, as roughly a quarter of respondents identified either the right- or left-wing camp as being the source of disinformation. A majority of U.S. respondents also suspect that their own government as a frequent source of disinformation — which (to date) is a clear minority opinion in Germany. Following similar patterns, "politicians and parties in this country" (68 %), "media and journalists in this country" (58 %), and "the government" (58 %) are also identified as sources of disinformation.

The topic area of "politics and elections" is more frequently associated with disinformation in the United States than in Germany, and the share of those that are very concerned about elections being influenced is also higher in the United States. Nevertheless, awareness of the issue is comparably high in both countries, although a larger proportion of the U.S. population believes that the topic receives too much attention. This is partially due to a slightly different understanding of the term among U.S. respondents. In the United States, the share of people who believe the term is only used to discredit alternative opinions is about twice as large as in Germany, comprising around one-quarter of respondents. In line with this, the proportion of those that see domestic actors as being a source of disinformation is also higher in the United States (39 % / +15 pp).

In the United States, people take a more proactive approach to the issue: Among other factors, this can be attributed to the greater frequency of encounters with disinformation. For example, 39 % (+23 pp) stated that they themselves could be at risk of being influenced by disinformation. Accordingly, U.S. respondents stated that they verify content more frequently, question it more critically, and use the services of fact-checking organizations more often than our results indicate for Germany. U.S. respondents were also significantly more likely to say that they have accidentally (39 % / +24 pp) or even intentionally (25 % / +20 pp) shared or liked false information.

Methodology

During the period from October 4 to 17, 2023, a total of 5,055 people were surveyed online in Germany, along with 2,018 individuals in the United States. All respondents were aged 16 or above. The survey was conducted by pollytix strategic research gmbh on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung using the Bilendi & respondi online panel. The data is weighted with a margin of error of 1.4 and 2.2 percentage points, respectively, in Germany and the United States.

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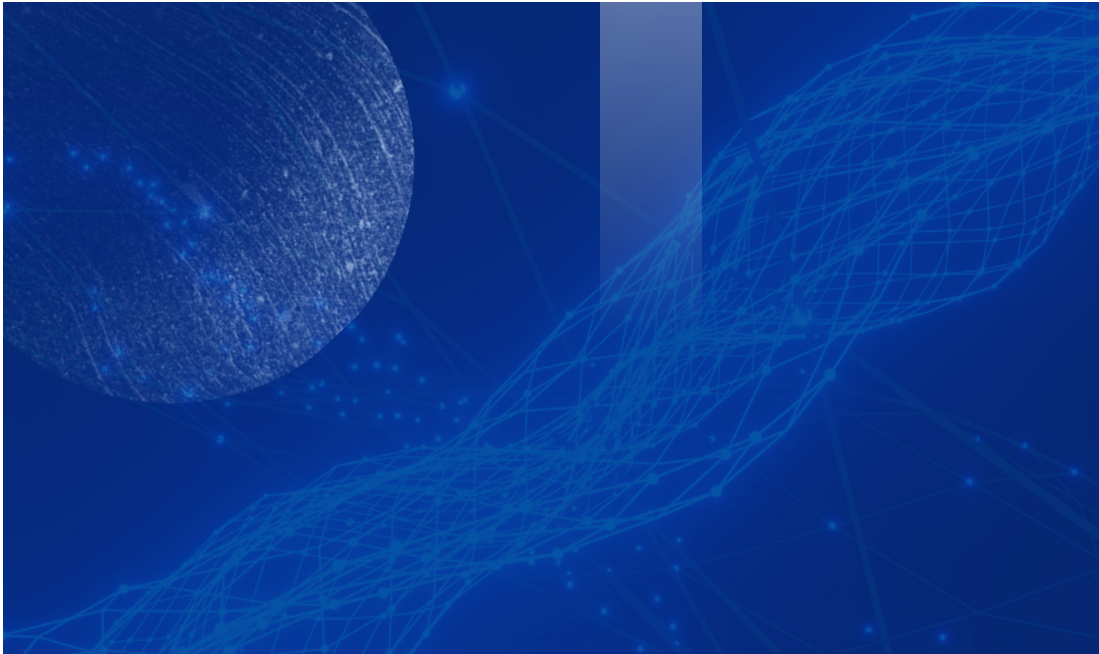
1. Introduction

As a "super election year" in which pivotal political decisions will be made in every region of the world, 2024 is a year of major historic importance. Around half of the world's population is being called to the ballot box, including citizens in the United States, India and Indonesia. Elections for the European Parliament are also being held, along with elections in the German federal states of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia. Recent history has shown that particularly in the direct run-up to elections, a considerable amount of disinformation is spread in order to influence the general mood of the population and the ultimate polling results. Given the number and importance of the upcoming elections — paired with the tense mood caused by war, economic crisis and growing populism — 2024 could also be a historic year for disinformation. This is because, in the digital age, information is available more quickly, more extensively and in greater variety than ever before. While this development has democratized the flow of information, it also constrains the capacity for systematic journalistic and editorial scrutiny. The traditional role of journalists and the media to research, verify and contextualize information is increasingly strained. This trend bears consequences for public debate, as disinformation creates uncertainty and makes mutual understanding more difficult.

When false information is disseminated with the deliberate intention to deceive, this is referred to as disinformation. It thrives particularly well in fragmented and polarized societies (Breidenbach et al. 2022). The more contentious the discourse and the more disparate the opposing points of view, the more likely it is that disinformation will gain traction. Once this happens, it can both fuel existing polarization and become a source of further fragmentation. Polarization and disinformation therefore have a reciprocal relationship: Polarization makes people more susceptible to disinformation, while the increase in disinformation campaigns in turn leads to a greater polarization. Distinguishing between authentic and false content is challenging, and efforts to do so are not always successful. Technological developments complicate matters further by enhancing

the potential for deception. In fact, even those better equipped to recognize disinformation may still experience uncertainty — a partial success for those that deliberately spread false information in order to sow mistrust.

In this study, we examine how the populations in Germany and the United States view disinformation. Are they aware of the issue? Do they perceive disinformation as a threat? Which topics do they suspect are subject to manipulation? And which actors do they believe are likely to spread disinformation?

Our study, which focuses primarily on the German population's view of disinformation, shows that the German public experiences the online world with a great deal of uncertainty. Half of those surveyed stated that they are often unsure as to whether information on the internet is true, while a third said they have regularly encountered disinformation. It is also clear that framing disinformation in terms of true or false information does not go far enough. The phenomenon of disinformation has two dimensions: on the one hand, that of deliberately disseminated false information, and on the other, the implicit dimension in which disinformation becomes a term used as a political weapon by "the media" and "politicians" to discredit alternative opinions (Hoffmann 2023). However, only a minority of our respondents consider the second to be true, with most primarily viewing disinformation as a threat to democracy and social cohesion (see Chapter 6).

For our research question, the comparison between Germany and the United States is particularly enlightening as a means of exploring the reciprocal relationship between disinformation and polarization. Society in the United States is generally considered to be particularly polarized, and there is often talk of a "deep divide" in the American population. Our study shows that the phenomenon of disinformation also plays a greater role in the United States than in Germany. Respondents in the United States are more often unsure of the veracity of online information, and they are more likely to say that they frequently encounter disinformation online. Polarization is a significant factor here, as U.S. respondents commonly attribute the emergence of disinformation to one of the country's two major political camps. About one-quarter of respondents in the United States additionally said that they believed the term "disinformation" is used to discredit other opinions. This comparison with the United States offers insight into a potential trajectory, illustrating the societal consequences of the failure to break the vicious cycle of disinformation and polarization.

Methodology

For this study, a total of 5,055 people in Germany were surveyed between October 4 and 17, 2023. A survey of 2,018 people in the United States was also conducted over the same period. In both cases, the overall target population was all residents aged 16 or older. The average duration of completing the Germany survey was around 20 minutes, while the U.S. surveys averaged about 10 minutes. The data were subsequently weighted according to official national statistics in order to ensure the representativeness of the results.[1] In each case, the samples were provided by the survey firm Bilendi & respondi. The surveys were conducted and the data was analyzed by pollytix strategic research gmbh. The analyses presented here reflect only initial findings derived

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1   For N = 5,055 respondents in Germany, the maximum margin of error with a 95 % confidence interval is 1.4 percentage points; for the U.S. respondents, it is 2.2 percentage points.

from the survey. This publication focuses on how the German and U.S. populations deal with, understand and perceive disinformation. A second publication, which is scheduled to appear later in the year, will deal with proposed measures to combat disinformation.

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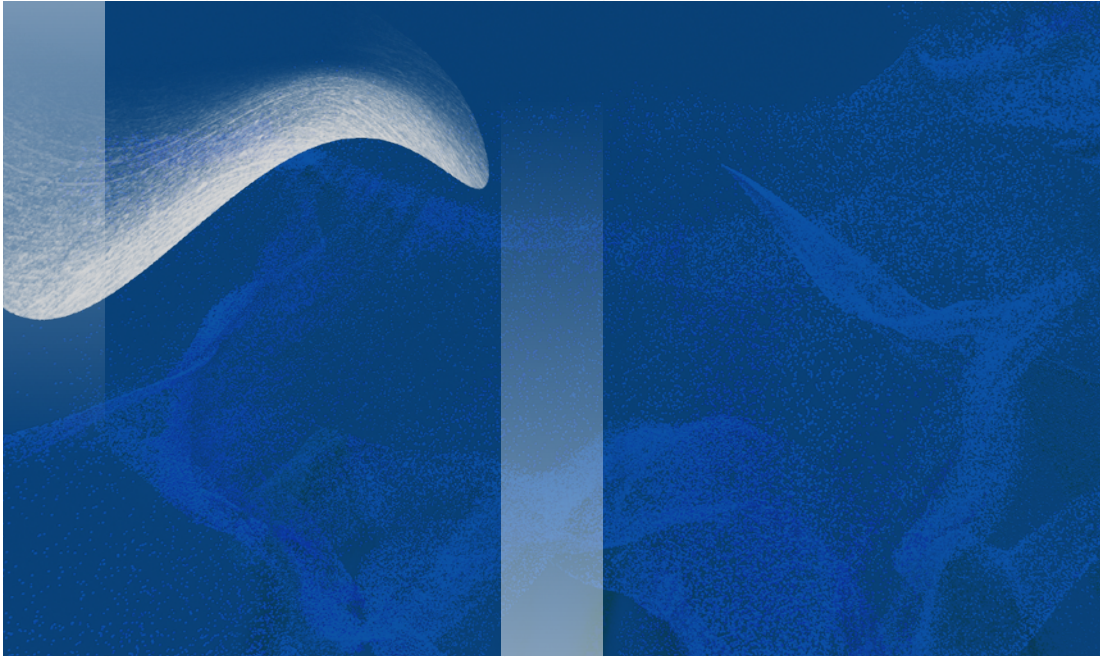
2. Trust in media as a relevant factor

Approaching the issue of disinformation through the lens of media usage and trust in media is a logical step. The risk of encountering disinformation varies depending on the media platforms that individuals rely on to inform themselves about political and current affairs. The choices that people make here depend not only on personal preferences but also on the level of trust they have in a specific source. Conversely, exposure to disinformation can alter one's attitude toward the media. Those who believe in conspiracy myths and "fake news" may become increasingly suspicious of traditional media outlets. However, uncertainty and distrust can arise even among those able to identify disinformation. The findings of previous research suggest that those reporting to have more encounters with disinformation are less likely to turn to traditional media outlets (Stubenvoll et al. 2021; Unzicker 2023), express less trust in the media (Hameleers et al. 2022), and are more likely to have faith in disinformation and conspiracy myths (Zimmermann and Kohring 2020). Moreover, there is a correlation between trust in media and belief in conspiracy myths (Dragolov et al. 2023). For these reasons, this study closely examines the interconnectedness of trust in media and disinformation, a theme consistently addressed throughout our analysis.

In our study, we consider the following three aspects when measuring trust in media: confidence in reporting on political matters, the assumption of systematic dishonesty on the part of the media, and the assumption that political actors and the media collaborate to manipulate public opinion.[2] Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on an 11-point scale. For the

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[2] The three statements are formulated as follows: "Overall, one can trust media reporting on political matters"; "The German public is systematically lied to by the media"; and "The media and politics work together to manipulate public opinion."

analysis, the scales were reverse-coded, with lower values indicating lower levels of trust in media and higher values indicating higher levels of trust. The three items were used to form a composite trust-in-media index ranging from 0 to 30 points. Respondents were then categorized into three groups based on their index scores: low trust (0 – 10 points), medium trust (11 – 20 points) and high trust (21 – 30 points). The distribution shows similar proportions of respondents with low (30 %) and high (28 %) levels of trust in media, with a relative majority of 43 % falling into the medium-trust category.

Low trust in media

Among those expressing low trust in media, 52 % are men, 48 % are women, all of which tend to have low-to-medium levels of educational attainment. However, there are no deviations from the national average in terms of age distribution.
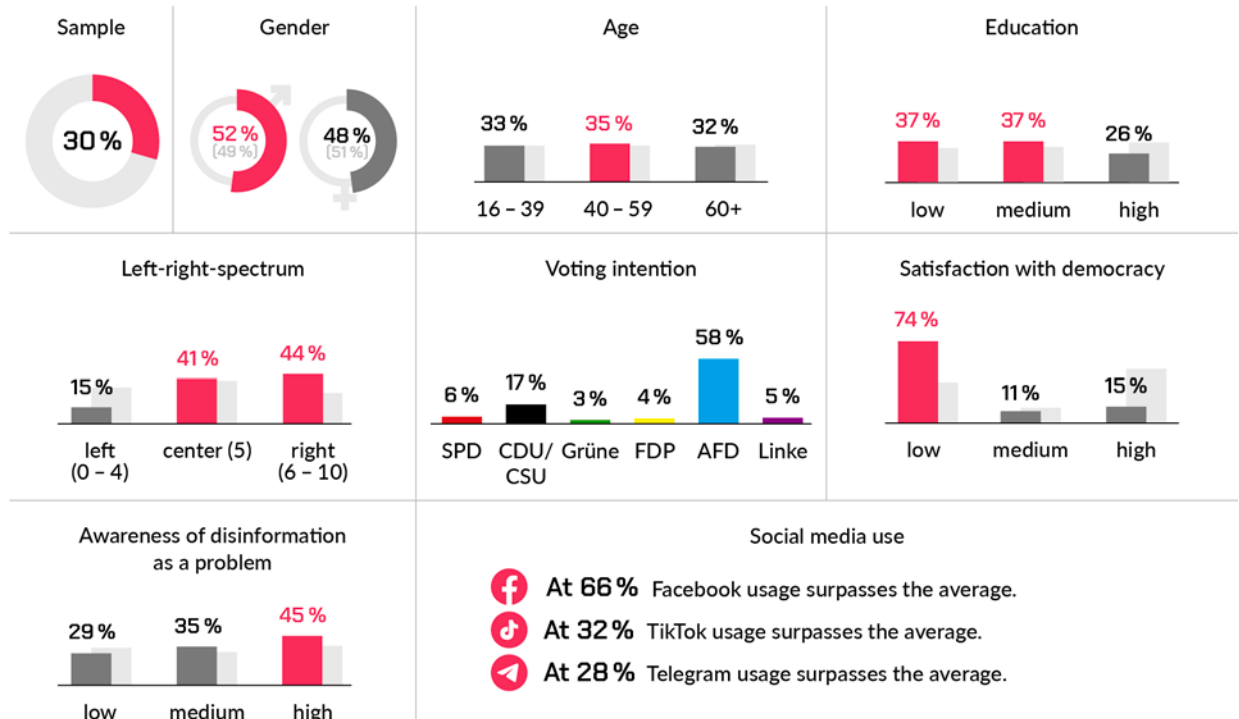
Politically, there is a notable tilt toward the right: An above-average share (44 % compared to 28 %) self-identifies as politically right-leaning.[3] 58 % of those in the group that indicated their voting intention expressed a preference for the AfD in the upcoming Bundestag election. This demographic exhibits deep-seated skepticism and pronounced distrust, not only toward the media but also toward politics and society. Notably, 24 % express fundamental mistrust toward individuals that they encounter for the first time — a figure significantly higher than the average (14 %). More than half (53 %) of which also believe that one cannot exercise enough caution in interpersonal interactions (+16 percentage points compared to all respondents).

Particularly notable is the dissatisfaction with how democracy functions. Seventy-four percent reject the idea that the democratic system in Germany is functioning well overall. This starkly contrasts with the 38 % of respondents in the overall (and) complete sample that share this sentiment. Members of this group demonstrate a strong inkling toward social media usage, with a high preference for platforms such as Facebook (66 %) and TikTok (32 %), along with the messaging app Telegram (28 %). Individuals in this group also frequently express feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of available information, leading them to actively avoid consuming news. This combination of skepticism and information overload significantly influences the media-consumption patterns and information-processing habits of those reporting a low level of trust in media.

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3 Classification is determined by respondents' self-positioning on an 11-point political affiliation scale, with 0 representing the left pole and 10 representing the right pole. All respondents with values ranging from 0 to 4 are classified as left-leaning; those with values from 6 to 10 are considered right-leaning; and those who chose the value 5 are classified as centrist. It should be noted that these classifications are based on respondents' self-positioning along a left-right scale rather than indicating support for a specific left- or right-wing party.

Figure 1: Profile of those expressing low trust in media

	Sample	Gender	Age	Education
	30%	52% (49%) / 48% (51%)	33% (16–39) 35% (40–59) 32% (60+)	37% (low) 37% (medium) 26% (high)

Left-right-spectrum: 15% left (0–4), 41% center (5), 44% right (6–10)

Voting intention: SPD 6%, CDU/CSU 17%, Grüne 3%, FDP 4%, AFD 58%, Linke 5%

Satisfaction with democracy: low 74%, medium 11%, high 15%

Awareness of disinformation as a problem: low 29%, medium 35%, high 45%

Social media use
- At 66% Facebook usage surpasses the average.
- At 32% TikTok usage surpasses the average.
- At 28% Telegram usage surpasses the average.

The light grey values represent the total sample, while the dark grey ones represent each respective group. Significantly deviant values from the total sample are highlighted in color.

High trust in media

The group expressing a high level of trust in media is also predominantly male (55%), but its members tend to be older and more highly educated than the average. Over half (52%) of individuals in this group identify as left-leaning on a left-right scale, with the SPD and the Greens being overrepresented in terms of voting preferences.

Moreover, this group reports a higher level of trust in other social actors and institutions. Eighty-three percent of its members express satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Germany. Of all three groups, they demonstrate the highest level of trust in others. A total of 61% believe that most people can generally be trusted, while 16% also extend moderate or complete trust to individuals they meet for the first time. As for social media usage, this group tends to be less active on social platforms overall, except for LinkedIn.

Figure 2: Profile of those expressing high trust in media

Sample	**Gender**	**Age**	**Education**
28 %	55 % (49 %) / 45 % (51 %)	27 % / 32 % / **40 %** — 16–39 / 40–59 / 60+	24 % / 28 % / **49 %** — low / medium / high

Left-right-spectrum	**Voting intention**	**Satisfaction with democracy**
52 % / 32 % / 16 % — left (0–4) / center (5) / right (6–10)	28 % SPD / 25 % CDU/CSU / **30 %** Grüne / 5 % FDP / 3 % AFD / 6 % Linke	8 % / 7 % / **83 %** — low / medium / high

Awareness of disinformation as a problem

39 % / 32 % / 29 % — low / medium / high

Social media use

Within this group, the share of individuals who use at least one social media platform daily is lowest, at **53 %**.
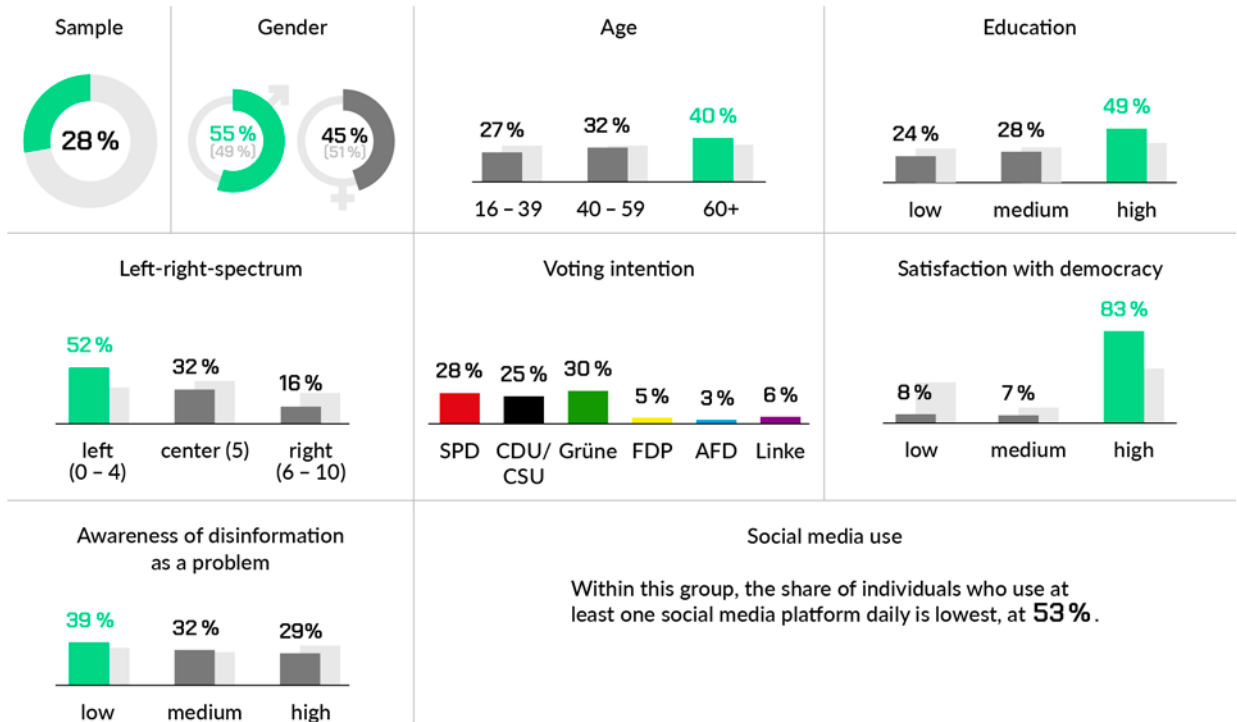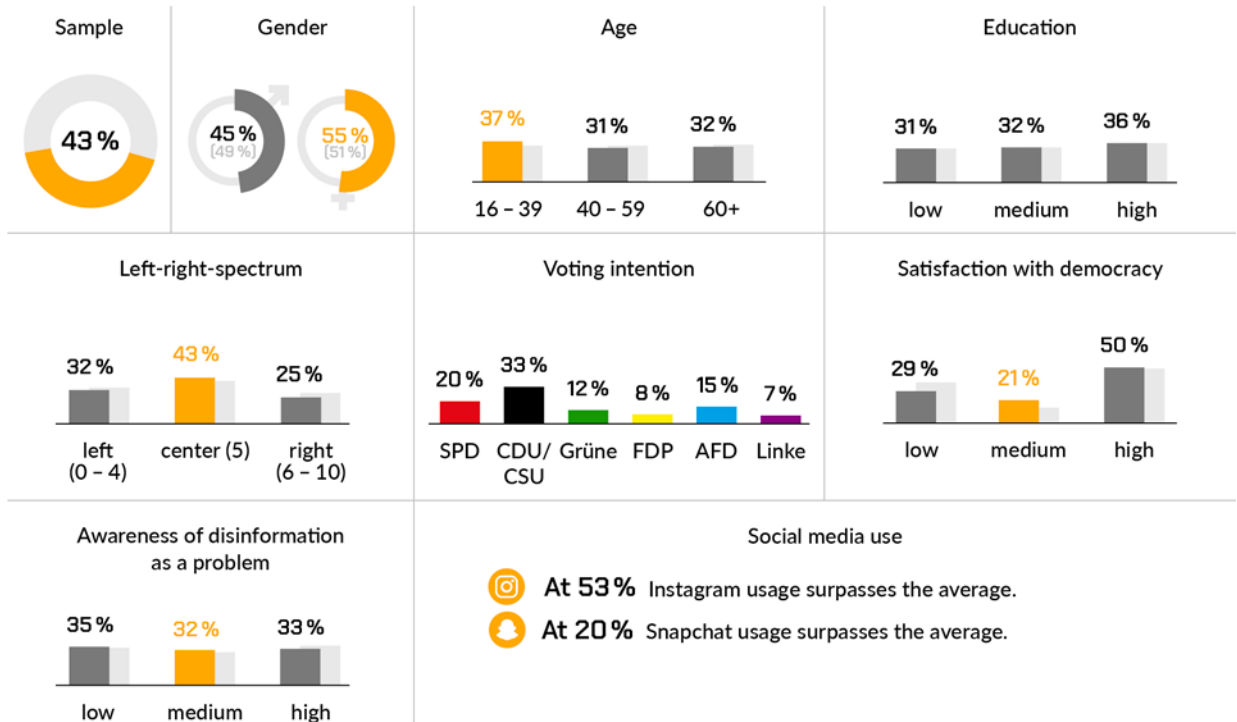
The light grey values represent the total sample, while the dark grey ones represent each respective group. Significantly deviant values from the total sample are highlighted in color.

Medium trust in media

The third group consists of individuals with a medium level of trust in media. This group is pre-dominantly female (55 %) and generally younger than members of the other two groups. Those reporting a medium level of trust in media are most likely to position themselves in the political center. In the next general election, this group would vote for the CDU/CSU more frequently than the average.

A mixed picture emerges regarding satisfaction with democracy: While 50 % express satisfaction with democracy, 29 % express dissatisfaction and 21 % are only partially satisfied. Overall, the group can be considered to be more apolitical than the other two groups. Forty-one percent of those expressing a medium level of trust in media indicate being very or very strongly interested in politics, compared to the 48 % expressing low trust in media trust and the 64 % reporting a high trust in media.

Figure 3: Profile of those expressing medium trust in media

Sample	Gender	Age	Education
43 %	45 % (49 %) / 55 % (51 %)	37 % · 31 % · 32 % 16–39 · 40–59 · 60+	31 % · 32 % · 36 % low · medium · high

Left-right-spectrum	Voting intention	Satisfaction with democracy
32 % · 43 % · 25 % left (0–4) · center (5) · right (6–10)	20 % · 33 % · 12 % · 8 % · 15 % · 7 % SPD · CDU/CSU · Grüne · FDP · AFD · Linke	29 % · 21 % · 50 % low · medium · high

Awareness of disinformation as a problem

35 % · 32 % · 33 %
low · medium · high

Social media use

At **53 %** Instagram usage surpasses the average.

At **20 %** Snapchat usage surpasses the average.

The light grey values represent the total sample, while the dark grey ones represent each respective group. Significantly deviant values from the total sample are highlighted in color.

3. Understanding of disinformation

While people are broadly familiar with the term "disinformation," they are less aware of the scientific definition of the phenomenon. In everyday language, the terms "misinformation," "false information" and "fake news" are sometimes used synonymously alongside "disinformation," although there are relevant differences between them. Thus, before we surveyed respondents' attitudes toward various facets of disinformation, we first sought to gauge their understanding of the term itself. Subsequently, all respondents were presented with a definition of the term "disinformation" before the terminology was used in later questions.

3.1 Awareness of the term

A total of 76 % of the survey respondents indicated that they had previously heard or read the term "disinformation," whereas only a quarter were completely unfamiliar with it. However, levels of awareness varied significantly between different sociodemographic groups. Men, older individuals and people who had a high level of formal educational attainment were especially likely to state that they were familiar with the term. Men and women showed a particularly significant difference in this regard: While only 67 % of women said they had heard or read the term before, the corresponding figure for men was 86 %. Moreover, responses displayed a linear effect with respect to the age of respondents: The older the survey participants, the more likely they were to state that they had heard or read the term before. Formal education also played a role: 85 % of people with a high level of formal educational attainment stated that they were familiar with the term, compared to only 75 % with an intermediate level and 68 % with a low level.

Figure 4: Awareness of the term "disinformation"

Have you ever heard or read the term "disinformation"?
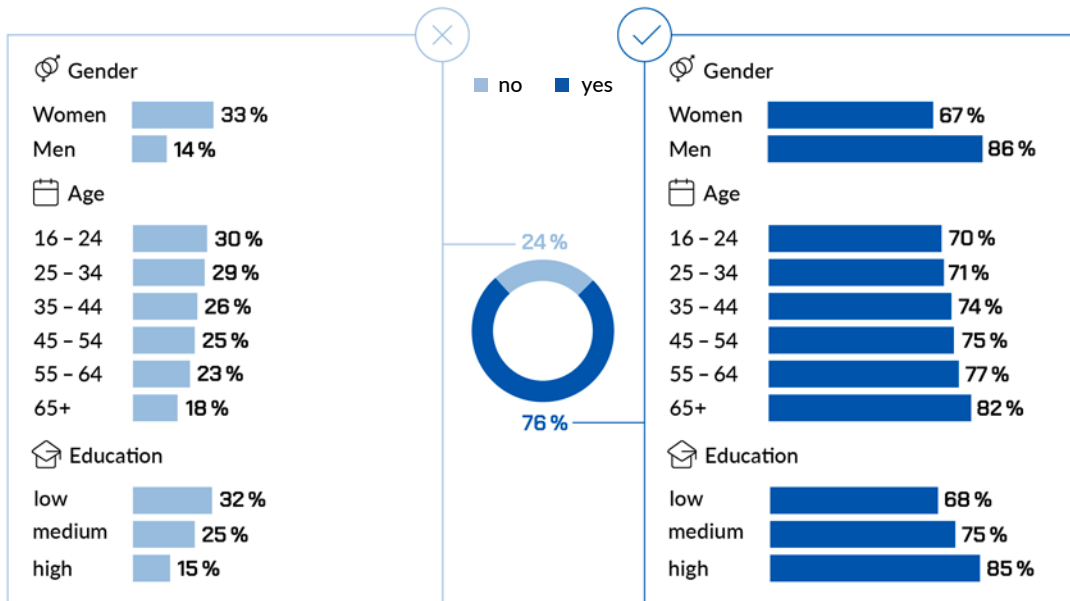
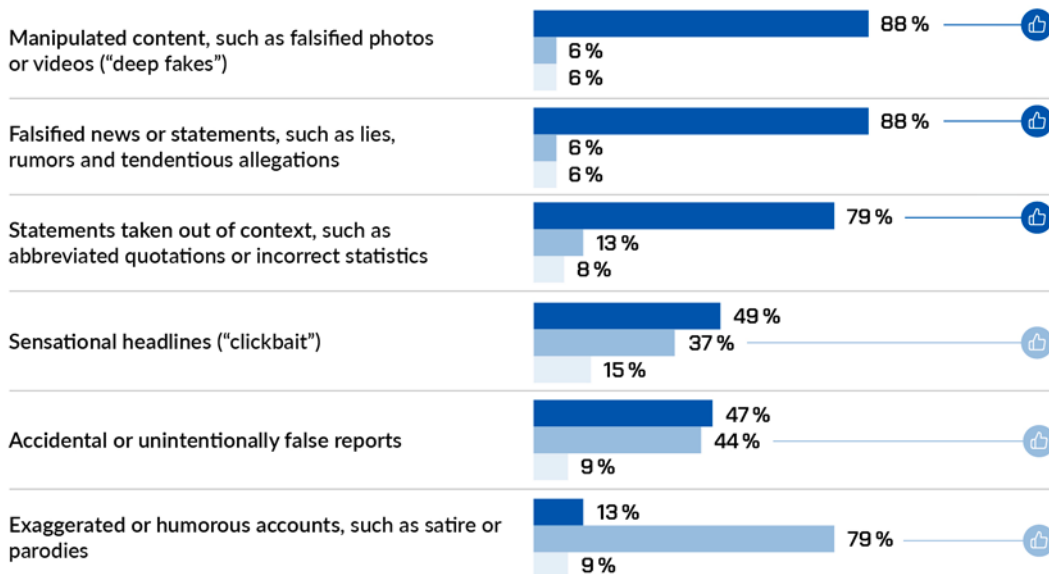Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100%.

3.2 Understanding of the term

However, we were not only interested in gauging the respondents' familiarity with the term, but also in examining their specific understanding of its meaning — and what aspects might be unclear to them. The difference between disinformation and misinformation is a question of intentionality. Misinformation is deemed to be false information that is disseminated without the intent to deceive. Examples include clickbait (e. g., sensational headlines), satire or parodies (e. g., exaggerated or humorous accounts), and unintentionally false reports. Disinformation, on the other hand, is always spread with the deliberate intention of deceiving or influencing others. Examples may include manipulated content (e. g., deepfakes, falsified photos or fake websites), statements deliberately taken out of context (e. g., truncated quotes or erroneous statistics), and purely invented news or statements (e. g., lies, rumors or tendentious claims). We therefore define disinformation as false information that is intentionally spread to cause harm or sow uncertainty (see also Unzicker 2023).

This definition was also presented to the respondents — but only after they were asked what they individually understood the term to mean. To get a better idea of what respondents thought of when they heard the term disinformation, they were asked whether they considered certain characteristics and examples to be disinformation or not. Figure 5 shows what kinds of content respondents considered to be disinformation. On the one hand, there is a high degree of agreement. A majority of survey participants clearly considered manipulated content (88%), purely invented news (88%) and statements taken out of context (79%) to be disinformation. In addition, 79% correctly stated that exaggerated or humorous accounts are not included in this category. On the other hand, it is also clear that respondents experience some uncertainty when it comes to classifying clickbait and unintentionally false reports. In each case, about half of the respondents also classified these content types as disinformation.

Figure 5: Understanding of the term "disinformation"

Do the following items constitute disinformation?

	Yes, that's disinformation	No, that's not disinformation	don't know
Manipulated content, such as falsified photos or videos ("deep fakes")	88 %	6 %	6 %
Falsified news or statements, such as lies, rumors and tendentious allegations	88 %	6 %	6 %
Statements taken out of context, such as abbreviated quotations or incorrect statistics	79 %	13 %	8 %
Sensational headlines ("clickbait")	49 %	37 %	15 %
Accidental or unintentionally false reports	47 %	44 %	9 %
Exaggerated or humorous accounts, such as satire or parodies	13 %	79 %	9 %

■ Yes, that's disinformation   ■ No, that's not disinformation   ☐ don't know
⟁ Correct response for each case   Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Moreover, respondents' previous self-reports of being either familiar with the term "disinformation" or not made no significant difference here. The self-assessed level of familiarity did not affect respondents' assignments of the various content types to the category of disinformation.
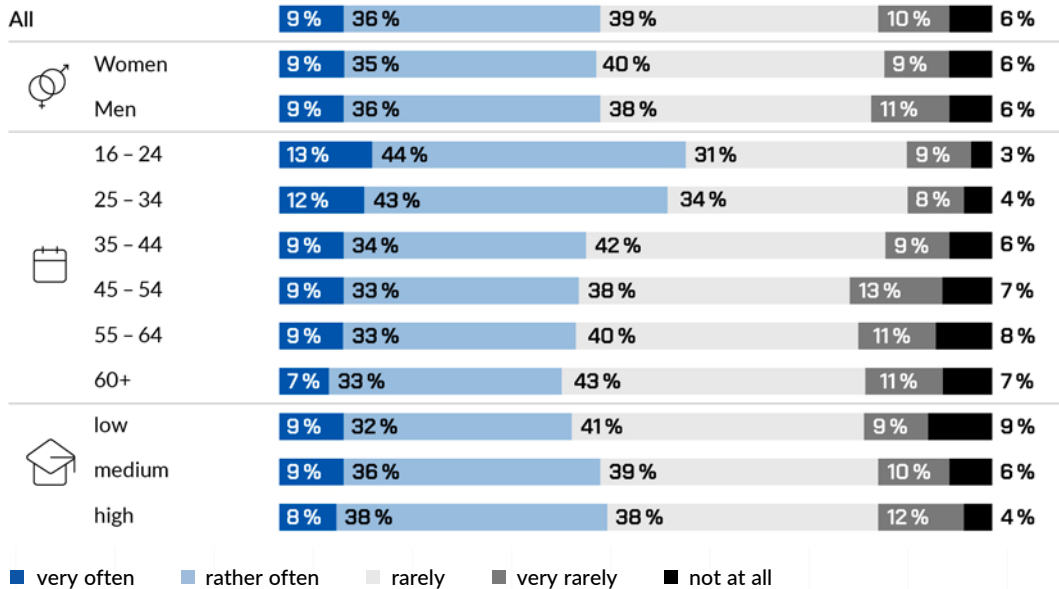
In contrast, levels of trust in media do influence the categorization of disinformation. People with a high level of trust in media were more likely to correctly classify the content types that are regarded as disinformation and to be aware that exaggerated or humorous accounts are not disinformation. Respondents with a low level of trust in media often had problems recognizing the distinction between disinformation and unintentionally false reports or satire. These participants often regarded both latter phenomena as falling within the category of disinformation. It can therefore be assumed that people with low levels of trust in the media may also perceive more disinformation in the environment due to their own broader understanding of the term.

3.3 Uncertainty about information

Since there is no systematic editorial review of content on social media platforms, communication is more direct and unfiltered than in other media environments. Consequently, citizens must independently distinguish between true and false information on an almost daily basis. In many cases, the problem arises from the fact that content does not have clearly identified sources. However, technological developments are also transforming our abilities to create, recognize and verify the content itself. Deepfakes, for example, make it increasingly difficult to assess the credibility of digital content, a. In fact, nearly half of the survey respondents said that they had very often to rather often been unsure whether a piece of information they had encountered on the internet in recent months was true or false (see Figure 6). This share corresponds almost exactly to the result of an earlier survey conducted in March 2023 (Unzicker 2023).

Figure 6: Uncertainty in assessing information

In the last few months, how often have you been unsure whether or not a piece of information you came across on the internet was true or not?

	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all
All	9 %	36 %	39 %	10 %	6 %
Women	9 %	35 %	40 %	9 %	6 %
Men	9 %	36 %	38 %	11 %	6 %
16 – 24	13 %	44 %	31 %	9 %	3 %
25 – 34	12 %	43 %	34 %	8 %	4 %
35 – 44	9 %	34 %	42 %	9 %	6 %
45 – 54	9 %	33 %	38 %	13 %	7 %
55 – 64	9 %	33 %	40 %	11 %	8 %
60+	7 %	33 %	43 %	11 %	7 %
low	9 %	32 %	41 %	9 %	9 %
medium	9 %	36 %	39 %	10 %	6 %
high	8 %	38 %	38 %	12 %	4 %

■ very often ■ rather often ■ rarely ■ very rarely ■ not at all

Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

The share of young people stating that they were often unsure of the truth of online information was higher in comparison to older people, especially within the groups of 16- to 24-year-olds (57 %) and 25- to 34-year-olds (55 %). Only 40 % of those 65 or above said they had often been unsure whether information online was true, while a majority (54 %) stated that they rarely to very rarely felt unsure. These variations can be partly explained by differences in media usage between the age groups. While people below the age of 65 stated almost without exception that they used social media on a daily basis, respondents aged 65 or above said that they used such services less frequently.
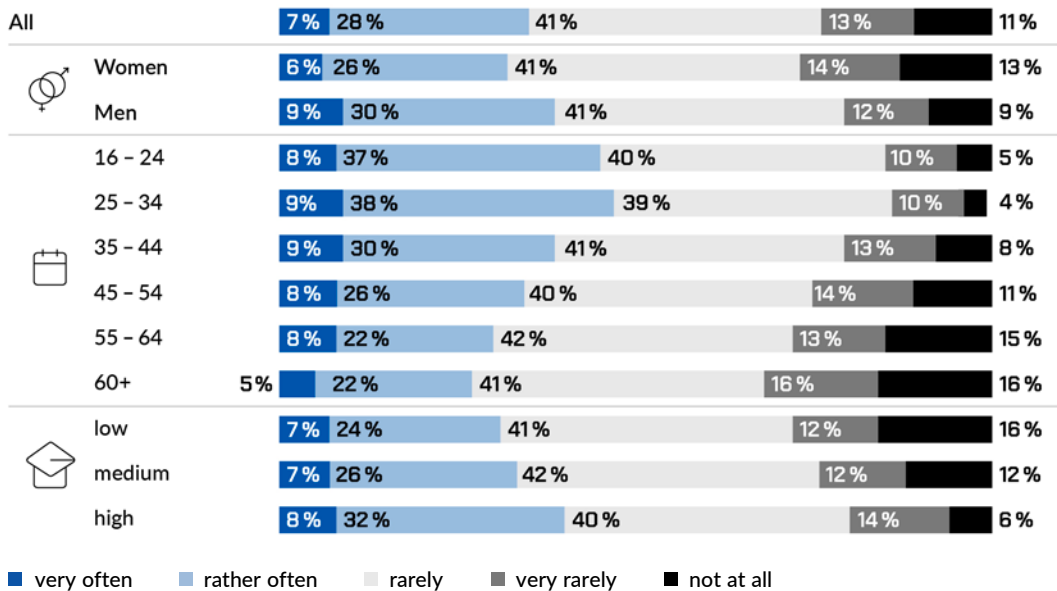
Again, a stark contrast is evident when looking at the levels of trust in media. Among those with low levels of trust, 60 % said that they had very often or rather often been unsure whether a piece of online information was true, compared to 46 % of those with medium levels of trust and only 28 % with high levels. Low levels of trust in media are therefore closely associated with greater skepticism toward the veracity of information on the internet. However, the data do not allow us to draw any conclusions regarding the direction of this correlation. Does a lack of trust in media mean that a person more often doubts that information encountered online is true? Or does a person's uncertainty in assessing the accuracy of information increase their levels of mistrust in the media more generally?

3.4 Perception of disinformation

If a person believes that they have encountered disinformation, this goes beyond mere uncertainty with regard to truth and implies that they have recognized the content as being intentionally misleading or false. A total of 35 % of all respondents stated that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Encounters with disinformation

In the last few months, how often have you encountered false information on the internet that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?

	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all
All	7%	28%	41%	13%	11%
Women	6%	26%	41%	14%	13%
Men	9%	30%	41%	12%	9%
16–24	8%	37%	40%	10%	5%
25–34	9%	38%	39%	10%	4%
35–44	9%	30%	41%	13%	8%
45–54	8%	26%	40%	14%	11%
55–64	8%	22%	42%	13%	15%
60+	5%	22%	41%	16%	16%
low	7%	24%	41%	12%	16%
medium	7%	26%	42%	12%	12%
high	8%	32%	40%	14%	6%

■ very often ■ rather often □ rarely ■ very rarely ■ not at all

Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

The more often respondents indicated that they had felt unsure about the truth of online information in recent months, the more likely they were to also report having often encountered disinformation. In this case, too, a comparison with the earlier survey from March 2023 (Unzicker 2023) is illuminating. While levels of self-reported uncertainty are similar in both surveys (-2 percentage points), the share of respondents reporting in the fall of 2023 that they had rather often or very often encountered disinformation in recent months was six percentage points higher than in the first half of the year.

There are clear sociodemographic differences in the perception of disinformation, both in terms to respondents' gender and age. For example, 39 % of the men stated that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months, as compared to just 32 % of the women. In terms of age, young people reported more frequent encounters with disinformation, with the youngest age groups — of 16- to 24-year-olds (45 %) and 25- to 34-year-olds (47 %) — stating that they had often come across disinformation, whereas the comparable figure in the group of those 65 or above was only 27 %. This is in part due to the higher frequency of social media use of younger people, as those who use social media more often and more intensively also reported encountering more disinformation than others did.

The observation that younger people report encountering more disinformation than older people do remains valid even if only the intensive users of social media in each age group are compared with each other. While older respondents were more likely to be familiar with the concept of disinformation, younger people said that, based on their own assessment, they had encountered more disinformation in recent months. Regarding levels of formal educational attainment, more respondents with high education levels said that they had encountered disinformation very often or rather often in recent months (combined sum of 40 %) than was the case for those with medium (33 %) or low educational attainment levels (31 %).

It is important to note that these are self-assessments. The fact is that it is impossible to determine how present disinformation is, how often it goes unrecognized, or how often correct information is incorrectly classified as such.

Differences again emerge in the analysis of respondents' trust in media. The lower the level of trust in media, the more disinformation is perceived. Almost half of those with low levels of trust in media stated that they had encountered disinformation very often or rather often. Among those with medium or high levels of trust in media, the comparable shares were only about one-third and one-quarter, respectively.

///

4. Dissemination of disinformation

The dissemination of disinformation is a complex phenomenon in which both content-related and technical aspects play a role. This chapter addresses the topics that most frequently serve as the subjects of perceived disinformation. A focus hereby lies on the role played by social media platforms and messaging services in disseminating such content. In addition, the study looks at which actors respondents to be responsible for spreading disinformation, and asks which motives respondents attribute to them.
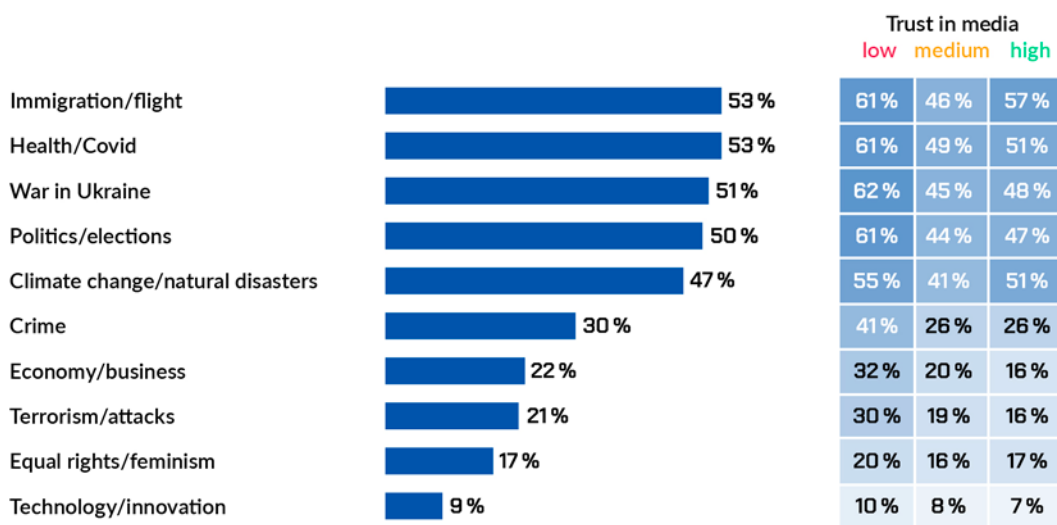
4.1 Topics

Figure 8 illustrates the topic areas that respondents most frequently identified as the subjects of perceived disinformation. In the survey, respondents were presented with a selection of 10 topics that are often associated with disinformation and that play a part in the narratives that most frequently appear in the German disinformation landscape, according to the nonprofit organization EU DisinfoLab (2023).[4] Survey participants were allowed to select multiple answers or specify additional topics. The topics chosen by respondents as the most frequent subjects of perceived disinformation primarily included those that are both controversial and seen as socially divisive: "immigration and refugees" (53 % said that they had encountered disinformation on this

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4   EU Disinfo Lab is an independent nonprofit organization that focuses on combating disinformation campaigns against the EU as well as its member states, core institutions and fundamental values.

subject in recent months), "health and COVID-19" (53 %), "the war in Ukraine" (51 %), "politics and elections" (50 %), and "climate change and natural disasters" (47 %). Fewer respondents said that they had encountered disinformation in other topic areas such as "crime" (30 %), "economy and business" (22 percent), "terrorism and attacks" (21 %), "equality and feminism" (17 %) or "technology and innovation" (9 %).

Figure 8: Topic-specific encounters with disinformation

On which topics have you encountered disinformation on the internet in recent months?

		Trust in media		
		low	medium	high
Immigration/flight	53 %	61 %	46 %	57 %
Health/Covid	53 %	61 %	49 %	51 %
War in Ukraine	51 %	62 %	45 %	48 %
Politics/elections	50 %	61 %	44 %	47 %
Climate change/natural disasters	47 %	55 %	41 %	51 %
Crime	30 %	41 %	26 %	26 %
Economy/business	22 %	32 %	20 %	16 %
Terrorism/attacks	21 %	30 %	19 %	16 %
Equal rights/feminism	17 %	20 %	16 %	17 %
Technology/innovation	9 %	10 %	8 %	7 %

Sample: All respondents who stated that they had encountered disinformation on the internet in the last few months. Missing values: Other / don't know.

Differences according to levels of trust in media were again revealing. People with low levels of trust in media were more likely to state that they had encountered disinformation in all topic areas. This low-trust group showed particularly pronounced differences with the full-sample average on the topics "the war in Ukraine" (+11 pp), "politics and elections" (+11 pp), "crime" (+11 pp), and "economy and business" (+10 pp). This reinforces the previous impression that members of the group with low levels of trust in media are much more skeptical overall, and more frequently perceive disinformation in their environment not only in general, but also on specific topics. This coincides with the perceptions reported by those likely to vote AfD. A look at voting intentions also shows that supporters of the Greens said that they have most frequently perceived deliberately incorrect information on the topic of "climate change and natural disasters," while those supporting most other parties stated that they have most often encountered disinformation on the topic of "immigration and refugees."
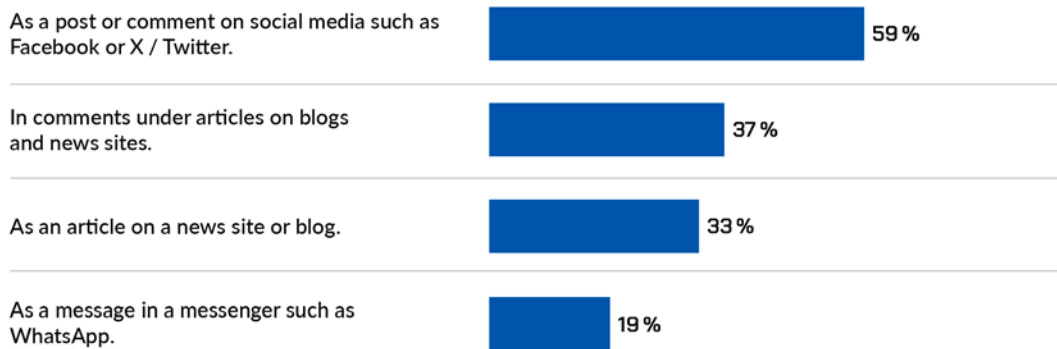
4.2 Social media platforms and messaging services

When asked to specify where they had encountered disinformation, the largest share of respondents said that they had done so in the form of a post or comment on social media (59 %). Smaller proportions said that they had seen disinformation in articles on news sites or blogs (33 %), or in the comments below such content (37 %). Around 20 % of survey participants said that they had recently encountered disinformation in the form of messages on messaging services. The finding that messaging services play a lesser role than social media may initially come as a surprise, as

Telegram, for example, is considered to be a primary channel for disinformation (for more on this, see 4.2.2). This is probably due to the differences between private and public communication. Messaging services are primarily used for direct person-to-person exchanges, while users must actively subscribe to channels. This enhances trust in these services and makes them more controllable. On social media platforms, content is usually filtered by an algorithm, which means that users also see content from sources they don't directly follow.

Figure 9: Dissemination of disinformation via social media platforms and messaging services

And where have you encountered such disinformation?

As a post or comment on social media such as Facebook or X / Twitter.	59 %
In comments under articles on blogs and news sites.	37 %
As an article on a news site or blog.	33 %
As a message in a messenger such as WhatsApp.	19 %

Sample: All respondents who stated that they had encountered disinformation on the internet in the last few months. Missing values: don't know / none of the above.

Perceptions of disinformation on social media correlate strongly with user behavior patterns. For example, 72 % of those who use social media particularly intensively (i. e., at least one platform several times a day) reported that they had recently encountered disinformation in these environments. On this topic, there is a risk of overestimating sociodemographic differences attributable to different usage behaviors, which could affect observations of age groups, for example. To avoid this issue, we compare only those respondents within each group that are intensive users of social media and messaging services. In this regard, we see only slight differences, with slightly larger shares of women, young people and highly educated people reporting that they have encountered disinformation on social media platforms.

The greatest influence here is the level of trust in media. Among those who use social media intensively, people with high levels of trust in media are more likely to have perceived disinformation on social media than people with low or medium levels of media trust are (around 7 percentage points difference).

By contrast, people with low levels of trust in media are more likely to have encountered disinformation in articles on news sites or blogs than those with medium or high levels — thus, potentially in news reports originating from journalists. However, when it comes to the comments under these articles, there is no significant difference between people with high and low levels of trust in media.
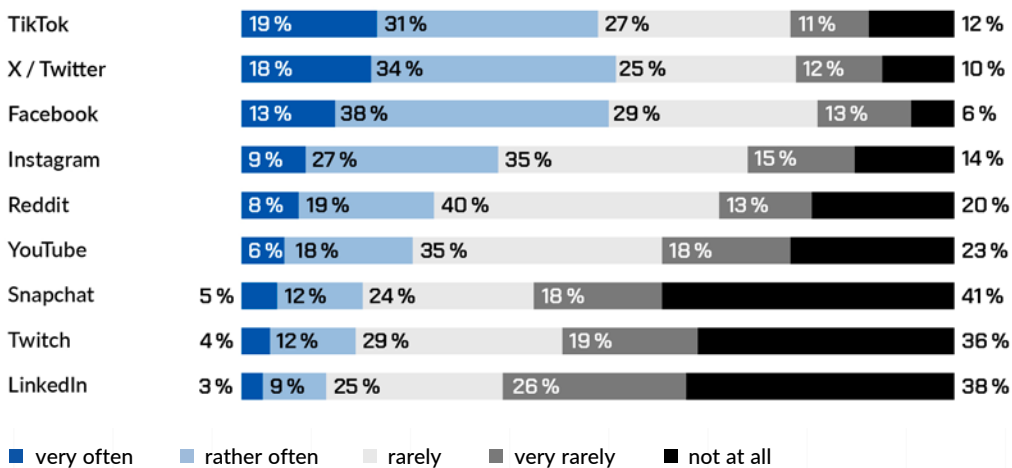
4.2.1 Platforms

Respondents most often identified social media as the realm in which they had recently encountered disinformation. But which platforms does this particularly apply to? As shown in Figure 10, according to the users of each specific platform, TikTok, Facebook and X (previously and in the survey still called Twitter) are identified as the greatest spreaders in this regard. About 52 % of X / Twitter users stated that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation there, and a majority of Facebook (51 %) and TikTok (50 %) users also said that they had regularly seen disinformation on these platforms. Instagram trails at some distance behind these three (36 %). These results also correlate with the intensity of use: Those who use a given platform several times a day also tended to report having encountered greater quantities of disinformation on that platform.

Figure 10: Disinformation on social media platforms

How often have you encountered disinformation in the following social media?

Platform	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all
TikTok	19 %	31 %	27 %	11 %	12 %
X / Twitter	18 %	34 %	25 %	12 %	10 %
Facebook	13 %	38 %	29 %	13 %	6 %
Instagram	9 %	27 %	35 %	15 %	14 %
Reddit	8 %	19 %	40 %	13 %	20 %
YouTube	6 %	18 %	35 %	18 %	23 %
Snapchat	5 %	12 %	24 %	18 %	41 %
Twitch	4 %	12 %	29 %	19 %	36 %
LinkedIn	3 %	9 %	25 %	26 %	38 %

■ very often   ■ rather often   □ rarely   ■ very rarely   ■ not at all

Sample: All respondents who stated that they had encountered disinformation on the internet in the last few months. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Across all platforms, younger people reported that they had encountered disinformation more frequently than was true of older people — an effect that persists even when considering the differing intensity of use in the different age groups. These differences are particularly great regarding Instagram and TikTok. A total of 58 % of 16- to 24-year-olds who use Instagram reported that they had often perceived disinformation on the platform, compared to solely 20 % of Instagram users aged 65 or above. On TikTok, 69 % of 16- to 24-year-old users said that they had often encountered disinformation there in recent months, but only 32 % of those aged 65 or above did so.

In the case of most platforms, respondents with differing levels of trust in media did not report major differences in perceptions of disinformation. Although people with low and medium levels of trust in media generally reported somewhat more frequent encounters with disinformation on these platforms, the differences with respect to the group with high levels of trust in media were not particularly large. The average difference between the groups with low and high levels of trust in media was around seven to eight percentage points.
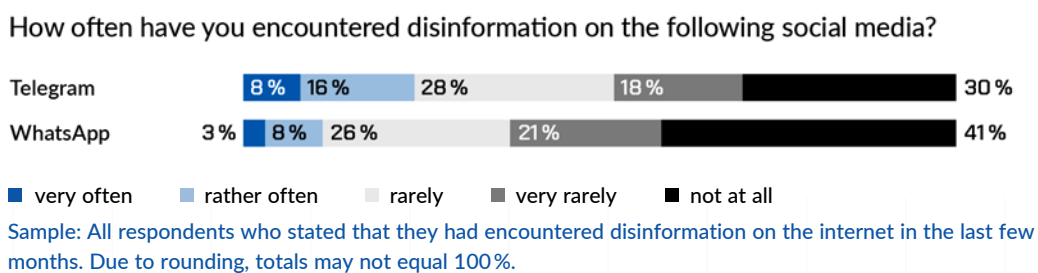
The only platform for which this correlation cannot be established is X / Twitter. This was the only social media platform on which more people with a high level of trust in media (52 %) said that they had perceived disinformation in recent months more frequently than was true for other

groups. In fact, people with high levels of trust in media indicated that they had encountered disinformation more often on this social media platform than on any other. Criticism of the platform has increased significantly since Elon Musk's acquisition of it in late October 2022. Immediately thereafter, Musk laid off thousands of employees, including many who had been responsible for content moderation on Twitter. Since then, the quantity of hate speech and disinformation has increased on the platform (Dampz 2023).

4.2.2 Messaging services

As Figure 9 shows, respondents saw messenger services as playing a lesser role in the dissemination of disinformation. However, this does not mean that they are irrelevant. Telegram, in particular, has a questionable reputation here. The Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS) even describes Telegram as "the most important platform for conspiracy ideologies and right-wing extremism" (CeMAS 2023). Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, Telegram proved to be fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. In fact, almost one-quarter of the service's users indicated that they had encountered disinformation on Telegram very often or rather often in recent months (see Figure 11). Specifically, about 8 % stated that they had perceived disinformation very often, and 16 % rather often. In comparison, the share of respondents reporting such experiences on WhatsApp, the most widely used messenger service in Germany, was significantly lower. There, only around 10 % said that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation. This is probably due in part to the fact that WhatsApp is still primarily used as a person-to-person messaging service. Although WhatsApp now also offers so-called channels, this function is still being developed, which means the service remains more widely used for personal communication with family, friends and acquaintances. In contrast, for several years, Telegram has offered its users the option of subscribing to (public) channels on which they receive regular messages and posts from various sources.

Figure 11: Disinformation via messaging services

How often have you encountered disinformation on the following social media?

	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all
Telegram	8 %	16 %	28 %	18 %	30 %
WhatsApp	3 %	8 %	26 %	21 %	41 %

Sample: All respondents who stated that they had encountered disinformation on the internet in the last few months. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.
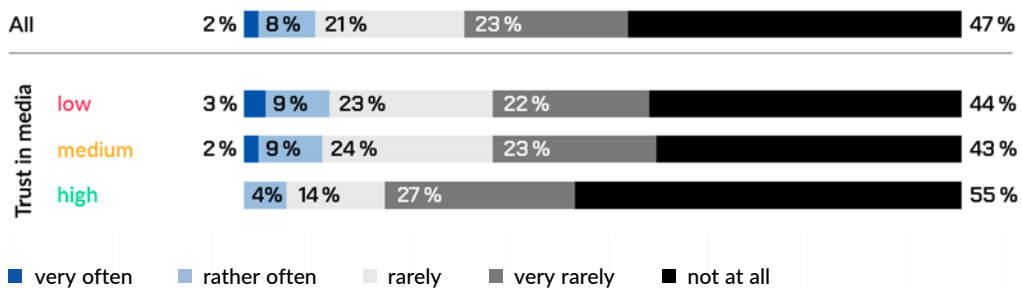
Here, too, it is worth looking at respondents' level of trust in the media. For example, the share of people with low levels of trust in media (12 %) who said that they have very often or rather often encountered disinformation on WhatsApp was higher than it was among those with high media trust levels (7 %). However, this does not hold when It comes to Telegram — where the opposite is considered to be true. Only 19 % of Telegram users with low levels of media trust, as compared to 30 % of users with medium levels of trust and 27 % of those with high levels, reported that they had often perceived disinformation on Telegram. The latter messaging service is particularly popular among people with low levels of trust in media, who use it at a rate almost double to that found to be true among people with high levels of trust in media (a respective 28 % and 15 % of these groups are users).

Like X / Twitter, Telegram has found itself under increasing public scrutiny due to its role in spreading disinformation. In addition to public channels, messaging services are primarily used to

exchange direct messages within users' personal social environments. About 10 % of the survey participants stated that they very often or rather often had received disinformation from people in their own environments via a messaging service (see Figure 12). Direct messages via messaging services can be a gateway for disinformation, especially if they come from the user's personal social environment. Presumably, there is a greater tendency to believe information and to refrain from identifying it as disinformation if it comes from known individuals within the recipient's own network of contacts.

Figure 12: Disinformation from the user's personal social environment

How often have you received disinformation from people from your personal environment via messenger (e. g., WhatsApp, Telegram) or text message?

Trust in media	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all
All	2 %	8 %	21 %	23 %	47 %
low	3 %	9 %	23 %	22 %	44 %
medium	2 %	9 %	24 %	23 %	43 %
high		4 %	14 %	27 %	55 %

■ very often ■ rather often ▫ rarely ▪ very rarely ■ not at all

Sample: All respondents who use messaging services / SMS. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Survey respondents who use messaging services considered their personal contacts to play only a limited role in spreading disinformation via these services. The share of young people who said contacts in their personal environments had sent them disinformation via a messaging service was larger than it was among other age groups. When asked how often they had received disinformation from people in their personal environments via messaging services, only 37 % of 16- to 24-year-olds responded "not at all," compared to 53 % of respondents aged 65 or above.
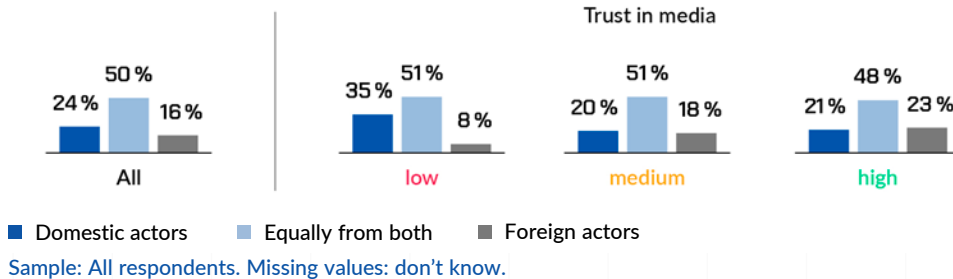
4.3 Actors

Who do respondents believe to be responsible for initiating and producing disinformation content? Does such content primarily originate from political actors or entities outside the political sphere? Do such actors tend to come from Germany or abroad?

4.3.1 Domestic vs. foreign actors

According to the Reuters international news agency (2021), Germany is the primary target of Russian disinformation campaigns in the European Union. Within Germany, discussions of disinformation have been strongly influenced by the reporting around former U.S. President Donald Trump's "fake news," the revelations about Russian "troll factories" and, increasingly, by the role of the AfD. Especially in the Eastern federal states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, this party is considered to be a right-wing extremist organization with an enormous reach on social media. These factors are also reflected in our results. As Figure 13 illustrates, half of all respondents stated that disinformation comes in equal measure from domestic and foreign actors. Around one-quarter thought it comes primarily from domestic actors, and only around 16 % attributed primary responsibility to foreign entities.

Figure 13: Perceived origin of disinformation from within Germany and abroad

What do you think, does disinformation in Germany originate more often from …?

Trust in media

Domestic actors   Equally from both   Foreign actors
Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.

A parallel look at trust in media shows that the share of respondents who primarily suspected domestic actors to be the spreader of disinformation was highest among people with low levels of trust in media, namely at 35 %. In addition to trust in media, political preferences also influence assumptions about the originators of disinformation.

Among those likely to vote AfD, 39 % stated that they believed disinformation to primarily originate domestically, whereas only 11 % said that they assumed such content came mainly from foreign sources, with only 11 % stating that they assumed such content to originate mainly from foreign sources. About 30 % of those likely to support the Left party also indicated that they thought initiators came primarily from within Germany. In contrast, those respondents likely to vote for the CDU/CSU and SPD parties were slightly more likely to attribute responsibility for disinformation campaigns to international actors (22 % each) than to domestic (actors 20 % and 19 %, respectively). Both the AfD and Left parties (and their supporters) are regularly said to have a comparatively positive image of Russia. This factor may partially explain the reluctance shown by these parties' voters to blame foreign actors for the spread of disinformation. However, this contrasts with the previously discussed finding that Germany is the main target of Russian disinformation campaigns within the European Union.

4.3.2 Actors' location on the political spectrum

In addition to the issue of whether initiators are seen as coming from Germany or abroad, there is also the question of which side of the political spectrum is more frequently perceived to be the source of disinformation. Figure 14 shows that a majority of 55 % of all respondents said that they considered disinformation to come in equal measure from entities on the political right and the political left. One-quarter of respondents said that they believed such content originated primarily from actors on the political right, while only 10 % said that they attributed responsibility mainly to actors on the political left.

Figure 14: Disinformation originators by assumed location on political spectrum

What do you think, does disinformation originate more often from ...?

Left-to-right political spectrum self-assessment

- Actors on the political left
- Equally from both ends of political spectrum
- Actors on the political right

Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.
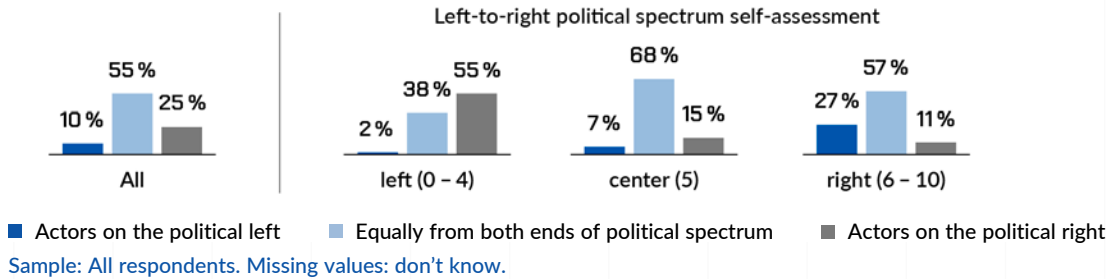
Unsurprisingly, there are clear differences in these assumptions with respect to respondents' own political self-positioning (see Figure 14). A majority of those that identified themselves as being on the political left said that they thought right-leaning actors were primarily responsible for disinformation. In contrast, only 27 % of those that positioned themselves on the political right said that they regarded actors from the left side of the political spectrum as being the main sources of disinformation. Notably, a total of 11 % of right-leaning respondents themselves identified actors from their own side of the spectrum as the most frequent disseminators of disinformation. However, the majority of those on the right (57 %) said that they believed entities on both sides of the political spectrum to be responsible for disinformation in equal measure. Respondents who placed themselves in the political center also tend to see actors from both sides of the political spectrum as being equally responsible.

In terms of voting intentions, there were particularly clear differences between supporters of the Greens and the AfD. As could be expected, the Green and AfD voters formed two opposing poles, each taking a clear position on the issue. A total of 61 % of respondents likely to vote for the Green party said that they believed disinformation comes more frequently from the political right, while only 4 % of those likely to vote AfD shared this view. Conversely, 35 % of those likely to vote AfD said that they thought disinformation comes more frequently from actors on the political left, as compared to only 3 % of respondents likely to vote for the Green party. The perception that disinformation comes from entities on both sides of the political spectrum in equal measure was particularly pronounced among likely CDU/CSU and FDP voters, while supporters of the SPD and the Left party showed an above-average tendency to blame actors on the political right. There is an evident tendency here to view the opposing political pole with skepticism or mistrust, although this is not nearly as pronounced as it is among U.S. respondents (see Chapter 7). And, of course, this tendency can be exploited by the generators of disinformation.

4.3.3 Specific actors

The set of potential disinformation producers and disseminators is diverse. Moreover, each of these entities can have different motives (see Chapter 4.4). Potential sources can be roughly divided into three groups: media, political and economic actors (see Figure 15). In addition, disinformation can also be disseminated by individuals who cannot be assigned to any of these categories. As can be seen in Figure 15, survey respondents indicated that they believed political actors play a particularly major role in propagating deliberately misleading content. Respondents most frequently blamed "protest groups and activists" for disinformation, with "bloggers and influencers" taking second place.

Figure 15: Dissemination of disinformation by actor

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation on the internet or are responsible for it?
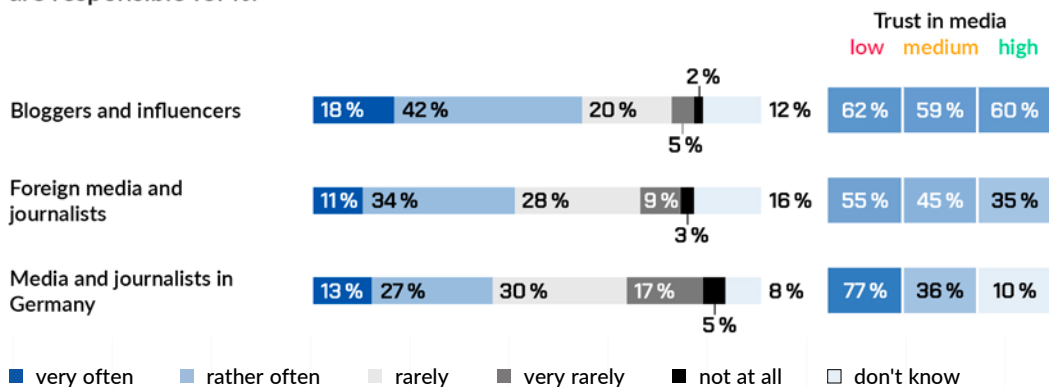
Actor	%
Protest activists and protest groups	66 %
Bloggers and influencers	60 %
Foreign governments	53 %
Politicians and parties in Germany	50 %
Individuals	50 %
Foreign media and journalists	45 %
Media and journalists in Germany	40 %
German federal government	34 %
Businesses	30 %

■ Political actors　■ Media actors　□ Economic actors　■ uncategorized
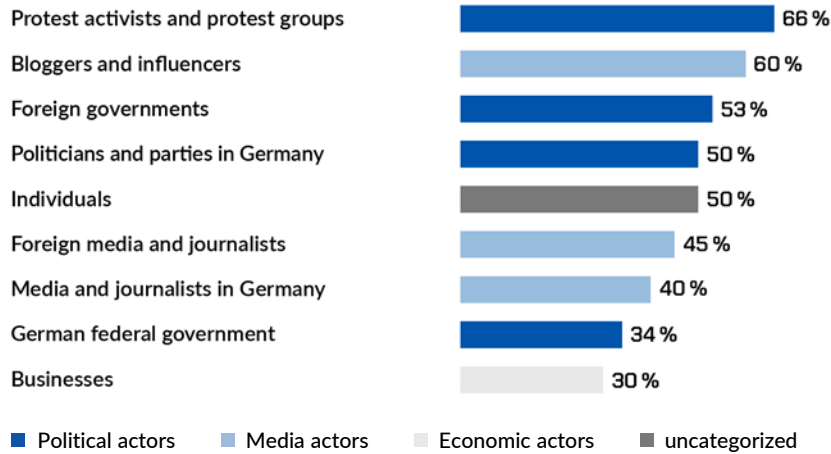
Sample: All respondents. Values shown: very often / rather often. Missing values: rarely / very rarely / not at all / don't know.

4.3.3.1 Media actors

Media actors can play a major role in spreading disinformation, as they often have the platforms and reach needed to disseminate false or misleading content effectively. A particularly large share of survey respondents said that they considered bloggers and influencers to be frequently responsible for disseminating disinformation online. A total of 60 % stated that they believed this group of actors does so very often or rather often (see Figure 16). This finding is presumably closely related to the role of social media platforms in circulating disinformation. While the share of respondents attributing responsibility to foreign media and journalists was somewhat smaller, 45 % did say they thought this group of foreign actors often deliberately spreads false content in Germany. 40 % of respondents said that they thought media and journalists in Germany were often a source of disinformation.

Figure 16: Media actors

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation on the internet or are responsible for it?

Trust in media
low　medium　high

	very often	rather often	rarely	very rarely	not at all	don't know	low	medium	high
Bloggers and influencers	18 %	42 %	20 %	2 %	5 %	12 %	62 %	59 %	60 %
Foreign media and journalists	11 %	34 %	28 %	9 %	3 %	16 %	55 %	45 %	35 %
Media and journalists in Germany	13 %	27 %	30 %	17 %	5 %	8 %	77 %	36 %	10 %

■ very often　■ rather often　□ rarely　■ very rarely　■ not at all　□ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are very often / rather often. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Respondents' levels of general trust in media had no evident influence on their assessments of the role of bloggers and influencers in spreading disinformation. However, differences specifically became clear with regard to survey participants' trust in social media. Respondents who had comparatively high levels of trust in social media were less likely (43 %) than the overall survey group average to say that bloggers and influencers were often responsible for spreading disinformation. In contrast, respondents who expressed little or no trust in social media were significantly more likely (67 %) than the overall sample average to say that these actors are often responsible for spreading disinformation.

There are clear differences among respondents with different levels of general trust in media when assessing the role played by foreign media and journalists. While 55 % of those with low levels of media trust said that they believed foreign media and journalists often spread disinformation, this figure was respectively 10 and 20 percentage points lower among those with a medium and high level of trust. This effect is even stronger when it comes to media and journalists in Germany. While 77 % of respondents with low levels of trust in media said that they thought German media and journalists spread disinformation often, this opinion was significantly less widespread among people with high levels of trust in media, with only 10 % of this group sharing this view. Although we cannot make a reliable statement about the direction of this effect, it could be argued that a lack of trust in media is both a cause and a consequence of the perception that media actors contribute to the spread of disinformation. However, even more respondents with a low level of trust in media said that they thought politicians and political parties in Germany were often responsible for spreading disinformation.

4.3.3.2 Political actors

Among political actors, respondents said that they thought protest groups and activists were most often responsible for disseminating disinformation (see Figure 17). A total of 66 % of the participants said that they regarded this group to be a frequent source of disinformation, with 22 % stating that this happened very often, and 44 % saying that it took place rather often. Thus, many respondents seemed to assume that spreading disinformation was an almost inevitable component of activism and protest.

In second place among the political actors were foreign governments, with more than half of all respondents (53 %) stating they thought these entities to often spread false information deliberately. However, politicians and political parties in Germany were only a few percentage points behind, with 50 % of survey participants saying they suspected this group of often being responsible for disseminating disinformation. By contrast, Germany's federal government was less frequently the target of such suspicions, although around one-third of those surveyed said that they thought the federal government often intentionally spread false information, and only 14 % said they did not believe this happened at all.

Figure 17: Political actors

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation
on the internet or are responsible for it?

■ very often ■ rather often □ rarely ■ very rarely ■ not at all □ don't know
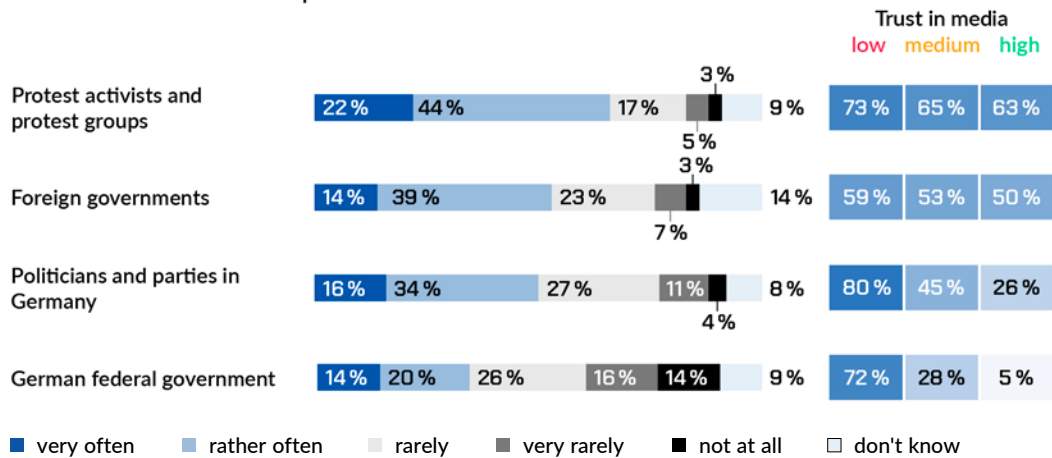
Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are very often / rather often. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

There is a linear age effect in respondents' assessments of protest groups and activists: 60 % of 16- to 24-year-olds said that they believed such groups often spread disinformation, compared to 72 % of those aged 65 or above. This difference may be attributable to the protest activities carried out by the individual members of these age groups. Activists often skew younger than the general population. For example, 18 % of 16- to 24-year-olds in the survey said that they had taken part in demonstrations in the last 12 months, whereas this proportion decreased with increasing age.

Political self-positioning also plays a role: 61 % of those who classified themselves as being on the political left said that they believe protest groups often spread disinformation, as compared to 76 % of those identifying themselves on the political right. The share of respondents that are located in the political center express this opinion with 67 %. Variances between specific party supporters were strikingly large. While only 54 % of likely Green party voters said protest groups and activists were often responsible for disseminating disinformation, 73 % of likely CDU/CSU voters, 71 % of likely AfD voters and 70 % of likely FDP voters did so.

Individual attitudes toward the media and politics also appeared to influence respondents' assessments of the role played by politicians and parties in Germany in spreading disinformation. For example, 80 % of those with low levels of trust in media said politicians and political parties in Germany were responsible for spreading disinformation either very often or rather often. The corresponding figure was 45 % among those with medium levels of media trust, and just 26 % among those with high levels. There are also clear differences when it comes to the degree of respondents' satisfaction with democracy, political attitudes and voting intentions. A total of 71 % of those with low levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy stated that they suspected politicians and parties in Germany of often spreading disinformation. Those with medium or high levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy were significantly less likely to hold this opinion. Only 49 % of respondents with medium levels of satisfaction with democracy's functioning, and 35 % of those with high satisfaction levels, said that they believed German politicians and parties were often responsible for disseminating disinformation. This proportion rose to 61 % among those who considered themselves to be on the political right, compared to 44 % among those with more left-leaning attitudes and 47 % among those who locating themselves in the political center.
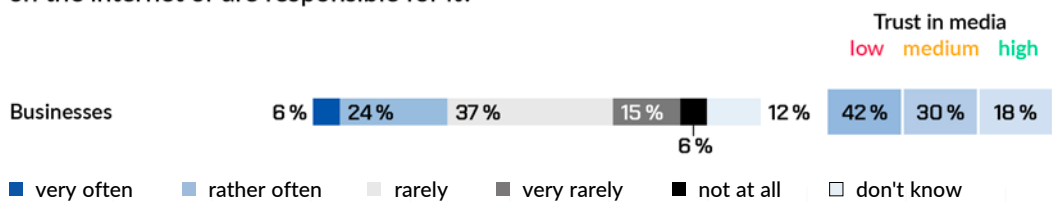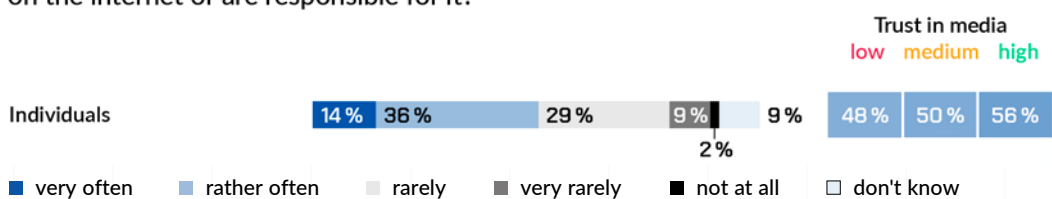
Likely AfD voters were particularly prone to say that German politicians and parties often dissem-
inated disinformation: 78 % of these respondents stated that they believed these actors often
spread deliberately erroneous information. Those likely to vote for the Left party also held this
opinion with above-average frequency, with a share of 54 %. However, this suspicion was less
widespread among likely voters for the SPD (34 %), CDU/CSU (39 %) and Green (39 %) parties.
Similar patterns can be seen in perceptions of the German federal government's involvement
in the dissemination of disinformation. The lower their levels of satisfaction with democracy's
functioning and levels of trust in media, the more frequently respondents said that they believed
the federal government was often responsible for spreading disinformation. The survey's highest
percentage, at 72 %, was reported among likely AfD voters who believe that the federal govern-
ment is often responsible for spreading disinformation.

4.3.3.3 Economic actors

Survey respondents identified businesses as being often responsible for disseminating disinfor-
mation online far less frequently than was the case for media or political actors. Around one-third
held this opinion, with just 6 % asserting that businesses did so very often (see Figure 18). A par-
allel look at trust in media shows that those who distrust media are also more likely to distrust
businesses.

Figure 18: Economic actors

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation
on the internet or are responsible for it?

Trust in media
low   medium   high

| Businesses | 6 % | 24 % | 37 % | 15 % | 6 % | 12 % | 42 % | 30 % | 18 % |

■ very often   ■ rather often   □ rarely   ■ very rarely   ■ not at all   □ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are very often / rather often. Due to rounding,
totals may not equal 100 %.

Figure 19: Individuals as actors

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation
on the internet or are responsible for it?

Trust in media
low   medium   high

| Individuals | 14 % | 36 % | 29 % | 9 % | 2 % | 9 % | 48 % | 50 % | 56 % |

■ very often   ■ rather often   □ rarely   ■ very rarely   ■ not at all   □ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are very often / rather often. Due to rounding,
totals may not equal 100 %.

4.3.3.4 Individuals as actors

In addition to groups, individuals can also be responsible for the generation and dissemination
of disinformation by independently creating and distributing articles, images and videos (e. g., in
the form of memes). They too sometimes may want to influence or disrupt public debates. Often
motivated by personal convictions or a desire for attention and influence, they also sometimes
want to influence or disrupt public discourse. In online jargon, people in this group are often
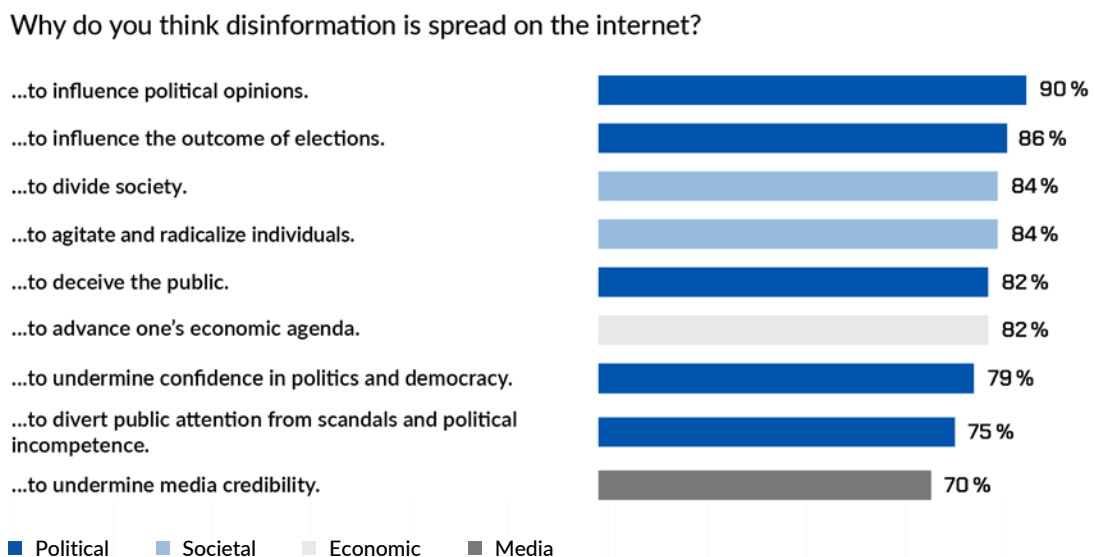referred to as "trolls."

Survey respondents indicated that, in their opinion, individuals definitely played an important role in the spread of disinformation. For example, 50 % expressed the belief that individuals very often or rather often deliberately spread erroneous information or were responsible for such content (see Figure 19). Furthermore, a linear effect can be observed here in relation to levels of trust in media: Individuals with low (48 %) or medium (50 %) levels of trust in media were less likely to say that individuals were often responsible for spreading disinformation, compared to 56 % of people with high levels of media trust.

Overall, it appears clear that many respondents — especially among the group with low levels of trust in media — do not regard disinformation as an isolated phenomenon. Rather, they see it as a problem of the "system," driven by influential, primarily domestic actors from the political and media spheres. These feelings result from a deep-seated mistrust in politics and the media, which is rooted in the assumption that entities from these spheres secretly work together to manipulate public opinion. In contrast, those with high levels of trust in media see actors such as bloggers, in-fluencers and individual persons as playing a greater role in spreading disinformation than politi-cians, parties or the media. When this latter group of respondents did suspect political or media actors, it tended to be those from abroad.

4.4 Motives for spreading disinformation

While individual motives for spreading disinformation can vary and be nuanced, four primary motives or motive categories can be roughly identified at the macro level: the desire to radicalize and divide society; the desire to undermine trust in media; political motives (e. g., the desire to manipulate public opinion, influence elections, etc.); and economic motives. Respondents most frequently identified the desire to influence citizens' political opinions (90 %) and the desire to influence elections (86 %) as the motives behind the spread of disinformation (see Figure 20). The share of respondents indicating that disinformation was meant to undermine the credibility of the media was the smallest, at 70 %. However, respondents' attribution of political motives to disinformation — and, in particular, the goal of undermining the credibility of the media — varies greatly depending on levels of trust in media, as will be shown below.

Figure 20: Motives for spreading disinformation

Why do you think disinformation is spread on the internet?

...to influence political opinions.	90 %
...to influence the outcome of elections.	86 %
...to divide society.	84 %
...to agitate and radicalize individuals.	84 %
...to deceive the public.	82 %
...to advance one's economic agenda.	82 %
...to undermine confidence in politics and democracy.	79 %
...to divert public attention from scandals and political incompetence.	75 %
...to undermine media credibility.	70 %

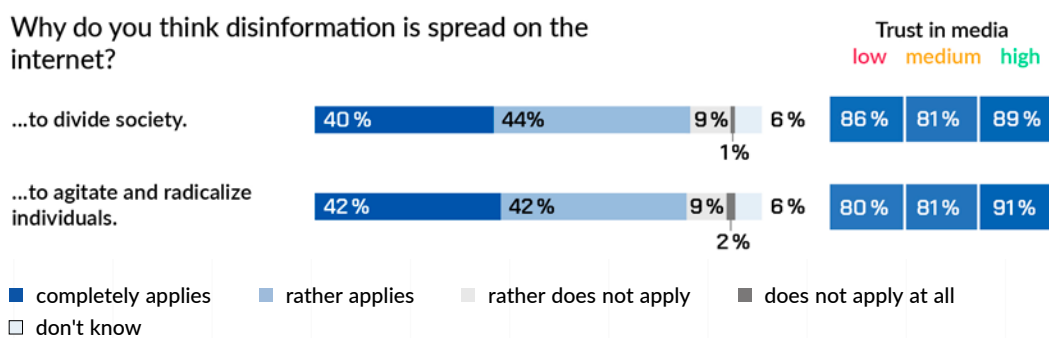■ Political   ■ Societal   ■ Economic   ■ Media

Sample: All respondents. Values shown: completely applies / rather applies. Missing values: rather does not apply / does not apply at all / don't know.

4.4.1 Radicalization and division of society

Disinformation can act as an accelerant for social conflicts, especially if it deliberately highlights such tensions, seeks to turn groups against one another or radicalizes individuals. In fact, a large majority of respondents said that they considered the desire to divide society and the desire to radicalize individuals to be possible motives for spreading disinformation. The intention of dividing society was deemed a plausible motive by 84 % of respondents, with 40 % completely agreeing and 44 % somewhat agreeing. A majority of respondents also said that they believed disinformation was intended to agitate and radicalize individuals. In this case, 42 % completely agreed and 42 % somewhat agreed that this was a likely motive.

Figure 21: Desire to radicalize individuals or divide society as motive for disinformation

Why do you think disinformation is spread on the internet?

Trust in media
low medium high

...to divide society.
40 % 44 % 9 % 6 %
1 %
86 % 81 % 89 %

...to agitate and radicalize individuals.
42 % 42 % 9 % 6 %
2 %
80 % 81 % 91 %

■ completely applies   ■ rather applies   ▫ rather does not apply   ■ does not apply at all
□ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are completely apllies / rather applies. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

4.4.2 Undermining trust in media

Disinformation can also be aimed at undermining trust in independent media organizations by sowing doubts about their credibility and objectivity. A total of 27 % of respondents completely agreed that this was a motive for disseminating disinformation online, while 43 % agreed that this was somewhat the case. Thus, although a clear majority agreed that this was a significant motivation, the level of agreement here was lower than for other possible motives.

Figure 22: Desire to undermine trust in media as a motive for disinformation
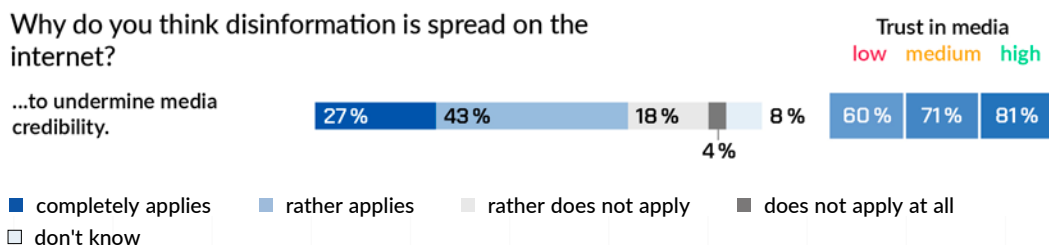
Why do you think disinformation is spread on the internet?

Trust in media
low medium high

...to undermine media credibility.
27 % 43 % 18 % 8 %
4 %
60 % 71 % 81 %

■ completely applies   ■ rather applies   ▫ rather does not apply   ■ does not apply at all
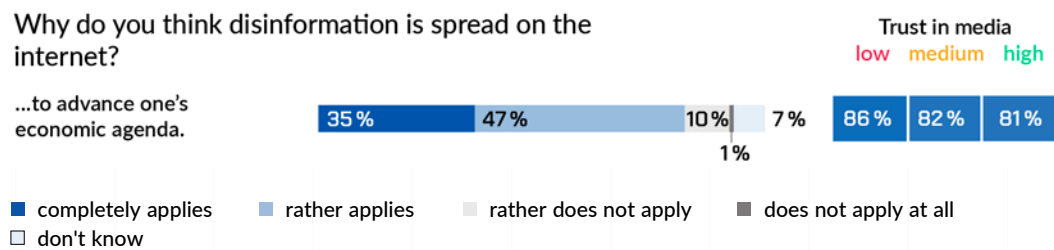□ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are completely apllies / rather applies. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Unsurprisingly, a parallel look at levels of trust in media reveals particularly clear differences here. Respondents who already had a low level of trust in media were significantly less likely to say that undermining the credibility of the media was a goal of disinformation (share agreeing: 60 %). However, among respondents with medium or high levels of trust in media, the corresponding figures were 71 % and 81 %, respectively.

4.4.3 Political motives

Political motives behind the dissemination of disinformation include the desire to influence public opinion and the desire to manipulate democratic processes, such as elections. In a society already characterized by dissatisfaction with politics and waning trust in democratic institutions, disinformation can help to foster even more mistrust and skepticism, thereby undermining the democratic order.

In particular, very large shares of respondents considered the desire to influence citizens' political opinions and the desire to influence the outcome of elections to be likely motives for spreading disinformation (see Figure 23). Of the respondents, 90 % completely or somewhat agreed that disinformation was intended to influence citizens' political opinions. Nearly as many respondents (86 %) agreed with the statement that disinformation was meant to influence the outcome of elections. This finding gives us hope in at least one respect: Today, many people are sensitized to disinformation aimed at influencing the outcome of elections. As a result, it is possible that resilience measures, fact-checking services and other counterinitiatives will be more widely used during the 2024 super election year.

Figure 23: Political motives for spreading disinformation

Why do you think disinformation is spread on the internet?

Trust in media: low medium high

	completely applies	rather applies	rather does not apply	does not apply at all	don't know	low	medium	high
...to influence political opinions.	48 %	42 %	1 %		5 %	92 %	87 %	94 %
...to influence the outcome of elections.	44 %	42 %	5 % / 1 %		5 % / 7 %	90 %	84 %	91 %
...to deceive the public.	36 %	46 %	11 %	1 %	5 %	90 %	78 %	80 %
...to undermine confidence in politics and democracy.	36 %	43 %	11 %	4 %	7 %	68 %	78 %	93 %
...to divert public attention from scandals and political incompetence.	34 %	41 %	15 %	3 %	6 %	91 %	76 %	63 %

■ completely applies   ■ rather applies   ▫ rather does not apply   ■ does not apply at all
□ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are completely apllies / rather applies.
Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Respondents generally saw political motives as being the most likely drivers of spreading disinformation. As such, there is a high level of awareness of the threats that this phenomenon poses to democracy. At the same time, the influence of trust in media emerged most clearly in respondents' assessments of these political motives. While respondents with a high level of trust in media were very likely to agree that disinformation is spread to erode trust in politics and democracy (93 %), only 68 % of those with a low level of media trust agreed with this statement. Conversely, respondents with low levels of trust in media were more likely to agree that disinformation is deliberately spread to distract attention from scandals and political incompetence (91 %), while only 63 % of those with high levels of media trust agreed with this sentiment.

4.4.4 Economic motives

Economic motives can also play a role in the dissemination of disinformation. For example, these motives could involve the desire to generate revenue directly through high click-through numbers or to achieve more indirect gains by using incorrect information to manipulate markets. Survey respondents appeared aware of these possibilities, with 82 % of them agreeing that economic motives play a role in prompting the dissemination of disinformation (refer to Figure 24).

Figure 24: Economic motives for spreading disinformation

Why do you think disinformation is spread on the internet?

Trust in media
low   medium   high

...to advance one's economic agenda.

| 35 % | 47 % | 10 % | 7 % | | 86 % | 82 % | 81 % |

1 %

■ completely applies   ■ rather applies   ▨ rather does not apply   ■ does not apply at all
☐ don't know

Sample: All respondents. For trust in media, the depicted values are completely apllies / rather applies.
Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

One thing is clear: Politics and disinformation are closely interwoven — both in terms of the actors believed to be responsible as well as their motives. Levels of trust in media vary, which in turn influences respondents' assessments of the dangers of disinformation. But it is also evident that a majority of Germans see elections and political processes as being targets of disinformation. However, in this case, the perceptions diverge depending on the level of trust in media.

In the political context, respondents with high levels of trust in media primarily think that disinformation serves to undermine trust in politics and democracy — in other words, precisely the trust that people with low levels of trust in media often lack. Instead, this latter group tends to suspect that disinformation is deliberately spread by German media and politicians to draw attention away from scandals and political incompetence. Individuals with high levels of trust in media are therefore more likely to fear external influence through disinformation aimed at weakening key pillars of society, such as free elections and independent media. In turn, people with low levels of trust in media assume that domestic politicians and the media deliberately use disinformation to deceive citizens and distract them from scandals.

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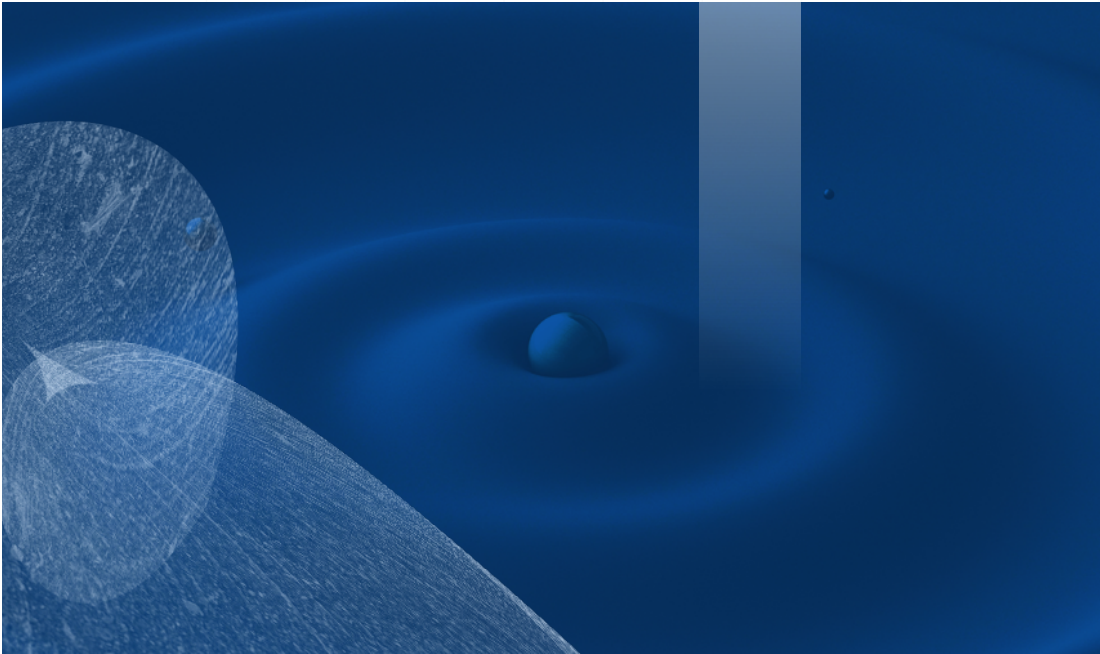
5. Responding to disinformation

Recognizing the crucial importance of addressing disinformation, it is vital to understand how individuals respond to such instances. Do they examine, identify, disseminate, and flag suspected cases of disinformation? Or do they aim to curb disinformation altogether?

5.1 Verification of disinformation

Individuals uncertain about the accuracy of information have various verification options: personal research, contacting the source, or using fact-checking services (see Figure 25). The majority, 57 %, choose personal research to investigate the accuracy of online messages.

Figure 25: Verification of disinformation

Please indicate whether you have done the following things. I have …

	I have done	I have not done	don't know
…actively researched to find out if a message on the internet is true.	57 %	40 %	3 %
…asked the person sending or posting news about the source and truthfulness of news, when I had doubts.	27 %	69 %	4 %
…used the services of a (fact-checking) organization to uncover and correct misinformation.	12 %	84 %	4 %

■ I have done ▪ I have not done ☐ don't know
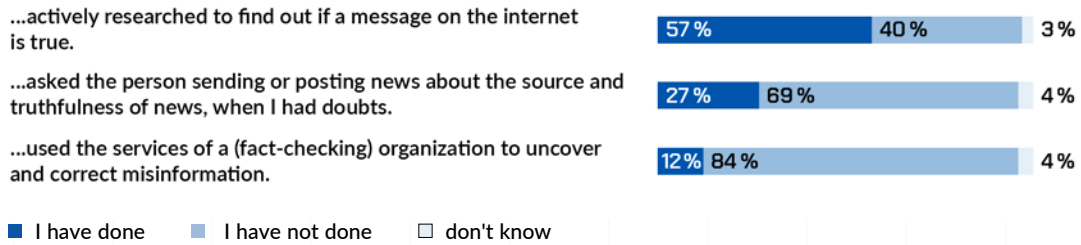
Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Notably, those that have encountered disinformation frequently in recent months are particularly diligent in terms of conducting their own research (74 %), as are respondents who often feel uncertain about the accuracy of information (69 %). This underscores the tendency of individuals sensitized to disinformation to prioritize truth verification. In other words, where suspicion of disinformation is absent or awareness is lacking, investigative efforts tend to be minimal.

Accordingly, all surveyed actions concerning how people respond to disinformation are primarily taken by individuals who encounter (suspected) instances of disinformation more frequently because of their extensive social media use. This pattern holds true across various age cohorts and educational levels: Younger individuals and those with higher formal educational attainment are more inclined to conduct their own research. For example, 69 % of respondents aged 16 to 24, 66 % of those aged 25 to 34, 54 % of those aged 55 to 64, and only 47 % of those over 64 actively engage in research. Moreover, 68 % of individuals with higher formal educational attainment levels conduct their own research, compared to only 44 % of those with lower formal educational attainment. This finding underscores the necessity for news- and media-literacy initiatives that are inclusive and tailored to diverse age groups. The differences in terms of trust in media are relatively marginal: Individuals with high levels of trust in media report conduct their own research slightly more often (62 %) than those with low (58 %) or middling (54 %) levels of trust in media. Given that individuals with low levels of trust in media more frequently express uncertainty regarding information assessment and encounter disinformation more often than respondents with higher levels of trust in media, this finding is quite remarkable. Apparently, those with lower levels of trust in media do not respond to this uncertainty and heightened perception of disinformation by undertaking more verification efforts.

Clear differences emerge among respondents based on their self-positioning along the left-right spectrum of political orientation. Two-thirds of left-leaning respondents (67 %) reported conducting their own research to expose disinformation. Similarly, among those on the political right, there is an above-average tendency (61 %) to research and expose disinformation. Among respondents positioning themselves in the political center, the proportion was significantly lower, at 49 %. This discrepancy can be attributed to a lower level of political engagement among centrists, which results in fewer interactions with politics, news and disinformation. Additionally, a withdrawal from politics may lead to less frequent verification of information, which is driven by indifference or a desire to avoid involvement in disputes rather than mere disinterest.

The second option, which was chosen less commonly than that of conducting one's own research, is to directly contact the originator(s) of the information or message. Only 27 % of respondents reported having queried the sender(s) of a message about its source or veracity when experiencing doubt. This lower percentage is likely due in part to the fact that not every

39

case has a sender available to contact. In addition, reaching out, which may expose individuals to potential confrontation with the senders, entails greater barriers than does conducting personal research. Confidence in one's own standpoint is likely a prerequisite for taking this action.

Trust in media does not seem to influence the choice of this option. Instead, we once again see the emergence of a discernible pattern based on political orientation. Left-leaning respondents, at 32 %, are the most likely to choose this option, followed by right-leaning individuals, who were slightly above the average, at 29 %. Centrists, however, are the least likely to pursue this course of action, with only 23 % choosing to do so. Once again, a pattern emerges in which self-identified centrists and less politically engaged individuals are increasingly disengaging from public debates on digital media. These debates primarily unfold between individuals at the extremes of the political spectrum. As a result, political debates conducted online — often without the input of centrists — may appear more polarized than they actually are in society.

In terms of sociodemographic factors, an education effect is evident in the data. Approximately one-third of respondents with higher levels of formal educational attainment (33 %) and one-quarter with moderate levels of formal educational attainment (25 %) reported that they had reached out to senders when having doubts about the accuracy of posted information. In comparison, only about one-fifth of respondents with lower levels of formal educational attainment (21 %) reported doing so. Moreover, younger male respondents are more likely to pursue this course of action. Specifically, 36 % of male respondents under 25 years old and 40 % of male respondents aged 25 to 34 said they had contacted senders.

In contrast, the option of referring to fact-checking services for identifying and correcting erroneous information is significantly underutilized. This option entails, however, not only being aware of such services but also having confidence in their offerings, which are often provided by public broadcasters, journalists or civil society organizations. Only 12 % of respondents stated that they had ever made use of fact-checking services. The usage rates among individuals with low and moderate levels of trust in media are quite similar, at 10 % and 11 %, respectively. Respondents with high levels of trust in media stand out somewhat, with 16 % reporting that they had used such services. In addition to exhibiting higher overall levels of trust in media, this group also expressed significantly more trust in public broadcasters.

In addition, we see differences in terms of political orientation that correlate with trust in public broadcasting. Among self-identified left-leaning individuals, 18 % reported having utilized fact-checking services. This figure was 12 % among right-leaning respondents, while centrists exhibited the lowest utilization rate, at 9 %.

In terms of sociodemographic factors, we see patterns similar to those observed with the other two options for determining presumed instances of disinformation. Young men stand out as more likely to opt for this approach, with 18 % of male respondents aged 16 to 24 and 23 % of male respondents aged 25 to 34 reporting that they had utilized these services. Usage rates vary based on levels of formal educational attainment, notably being lowest among those with low levels of formal education (7 %), slightly higher among those with moderate levels of formal education (10 %), and highest among those with high levels of formal education (17 %).
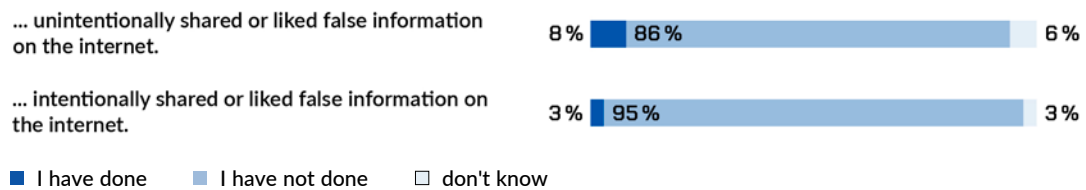
5.2 Dissemination of disinformation

Disinformation campaigns aimed at deceiving and manipulating others require dissemination to be effective. Those who actively engage in political debates, particularly on social media platforms, may inadvertently propagate false information amid the rapid-fire exchanges that are typical of online discussions (see Figure 26). This is also reflected in our data, as those expressing political opinions online run the risk more often of contributing to the spread of disinformation.

Figure 26: Dissemination of disinformation

Please indicate whether you have done the following things. I have …

… unintentionally shared or liked false information on the internet.	8 %	86 %		6 %
… intentionally shared or liked false information on the internet.	3 %	95 %		3 %

■ I have done   ■ I have not done   ☐ don't know

Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Survey findings show that unintentional dissemination is far more prevalent than deliberate efforts. Eight percent of respondents acknowledged having inadvertently endorsed or circulated false information online. Among those who stated that they express political views on social media, this percentage surges to 19 %.

Upon closer examination of disparities linked to trust in media, it becomes apparent that individuals with low (10 %) and medium (9 %) levels of trust are more likely to admit to inadvertently spreading misinformation. Among respondents with a high level of trust in media, this figure falls to a mere 5 %. It remains unclear whether these discrepancies stem from genuine self-awareness or a lack of accurate self-assessment.

We also see a visible trend among both left- and right-leaning respondents, with those who often take a political stance online (9 % and 10 %, respectively) having inadvertently contributed to the spread of disinformation more frequently than their centrist counterparts (7 %). Among likely AfD voters, this tendency peaks, at 11 %, while likely CDU/CSU and the FDP voters exhibit the lowest rates, at 7 % each.

According to respondents' self-reports, the intentional dissemination of disinformation is considerably less common: a mere 3 % of respondents admitted to consciously endorsing or circulating false information online. However, among those who express political views on social media, this figure rose to 6 %. While the differences noted among individuals with varying levels of trust in media may appear minor at first glance, they become significant when considering the low percentage values. Given the intent to deliberately mislead others in such instances, we should not lose sight of what this means for society. At 4 %, respondents with low levels of trust in media were four times more likely to intentionally spread disinformation than respondents with high levels of trust in media (1 %). Similarly, individuals with medium levels of trust in media show a threefold increase (3 %).

5.3 Preventing the spread of disinformation

In addition to identifying and unintentionally or, in rare cases, intentionally spreading disinformation, the third relevant aspect in dealing with disinformation is preventing its further propagation. Individuals can either contact the sender(s) directly or report the misleading content or accounts to the respective platforms (see Figure 27). Both approaches presuppose that one can accurately identify disinformation and that one is familiar with the platform's reporting mechanisms. In addition, a certain degree of political engagement is required for individuals to take this kind of action.

Figure 27: Preventing disinformation

Please indicate whether you have done the following things. I have ...

	I have done	I have not done	don't know
...alerted someone with a comment or message that he or she is spreading false information.	30 %	67 %	4 %
... reported a post or account on social media because someone spread false information.	25 %	72 %	3 %

■ I have done　■ I have not done　☐ don't know
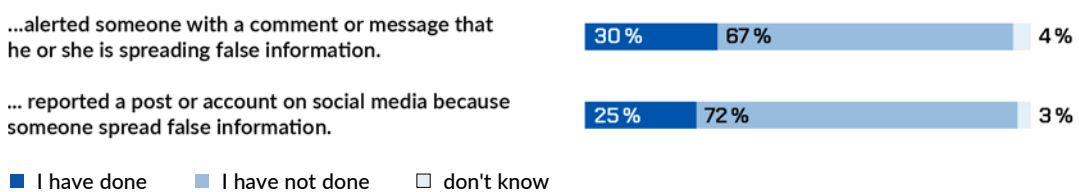
Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

The more common approach to curbing the spread of disinformation involves reaching out to the sender(s). Thirty percent of respondents stated that they had, through comments or messages, drawn someone's attention to the fact that he or she is spreading false information.

Education levels appear to influence individuals' propensity to initiate contact with senders suspected of disseminating disinformation. Specifically, 25 % of respondents with low levels of formal educational attainment, 29 % with medium levels, and 33 % with high levels have taken such action. Particularly noteworthy is the above-average share of young men that engage in this activity. Thirty-nine percent of men under 25 and 44 % of men aged 25 to 34 reported that they had opted for this approach.

Political engagement also appears to play a role here, as individuals who are active in expressing political views online are more inclined to draw attention to instances of disinformation. Among those who have taken a political stance on social media, this share is notably high, at 59 %.

Respondents were somewhat less likely (25 %) to state that they had reported misleading content or accounts on social media to the respective platform. Individuals with high levels of trust in media are more likely to engage in this activity (28 %) than those with moderate or low levels of trust in media (25 % each). This option is more commonly exercised by those who use social media intensively (35 %). As such, they encounter disinformation more frequently and are arguably more familiar with platform functionalities. Once again, individuals who express political views online showed a preference for this option, with nearly half of them (47 %) reporting having done so.

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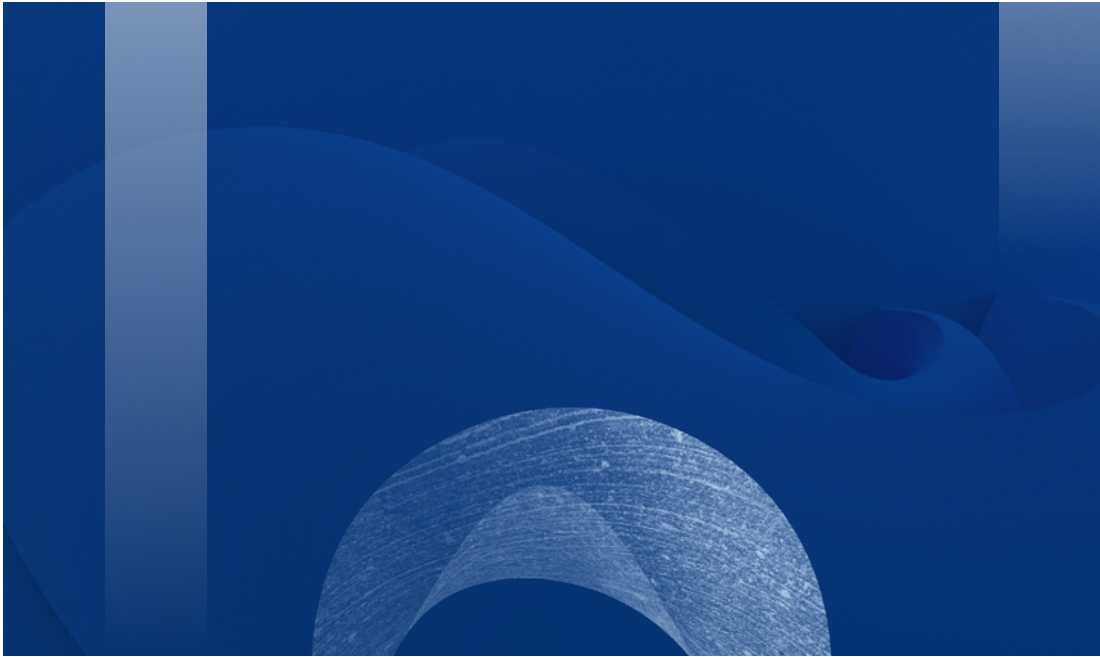
6. Awareness of the issue and concerns

Our evaluation has clearly established the presence of disinformation in Germany's media environment, with respondents often unsure about the accuracy of online information. Throughout society, there is a suspicion that this phenomenon is primarily driven by political motives, aiming to influence opinions or election outcomes. Ordinary citizens perceive protest groups, activists, bloggers, influencers, and foreign governments as frequent spreaders of disinformation.

But how do citizens assess the impact of disinformation on society more generally? To what extent do they see the term as describing a serious societal problem or, on the contrary, regard it as a term used to discredit alternative opinions? What are German citizens' specific about the consequences of widespread disinformation? And do they believe that they themselves might be influenced by such content, or do they see this as solely a problem affecting their fellow citizens?

6.1 Risk of being influenced by disinformation

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to assess the risk of being influenced by disinformation, both personally and for others. The results show that people evaluate this risk very differently when thinking of themselves versus others.

Just 16 % of respondents said that they thought there was a high risk that their own opinion on a topic would be influenced by disinformation (see Figure 28). In contrast, 78 % considered this risk to be low — and, in fact, almost one-third (30 %) even regarded this risk as being very low. Respondents with a high level of trust in media were particularly confident, as just 8 % of this

group saw a high risk of being personally influenced, which is a significantly lower proportion than among the sample as a whole. The assessments of the two groups with low and medium levels of trust in media differed only slightly from one another. About 21 % of respondents with low levels of trust in media rated their own risk of being influenced as high, whereas the share was 20 % for those with medium levels of trust in media. Among respondents who said that they had often encountered disinformation in recent months, a similarly above-average share (23 %) considered their own risk of being influenced to be high.

Figure 28: Risk of being personally influenced by disinformation

In general, how great do you think the risk is that you will be influenced in your opinion on a topic by disinformation?
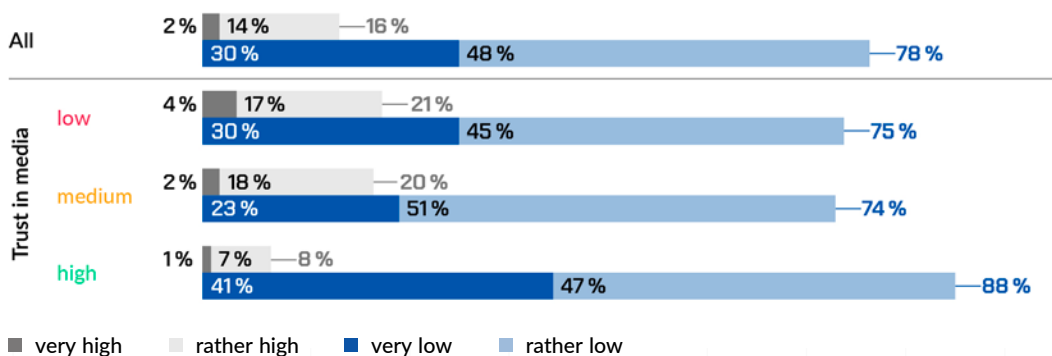
Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.

From a sociodemographic perspective, younger respondents were significantly more likely than older respondents to see a high risk of being personally influenced by disinformation. Among 16- to 24-year-olds, for example, 26 % expressed this concern, and among 25- to 34-year-olds, the corresponding figure even rose to 28 %. However, just 12 % of those aged 55 to 64 regarded themselves as being at high risk. In the 65-and-above age category, the proportion fell further to 10 %. A parallel look at social media usage is also interesting. Those who are intensively active on social media — meaning those who use such platforms several times a day — were more likely to see a high risk of being personally influenced (20 %).

However, concerning other individuals, a strikingly different perspective arises. While most respondents perceived their own susceptibility to disinformation as low, a significant majority (70 %) perceived the risk for others as high (refer to Figure 29). Hence, it appears that many individuals primarily view disinformation as a threat to others, often believing they themselves are immune (Schulz and Ickstadt 2023).

Figure 29: Risk that other people will be influenced by disinformation

In general, how great do you think the risk is that others will be influenced in
their opinion on a topic by disinformation?

■ very high   ■ rather high   ■ very low   ■ rather low
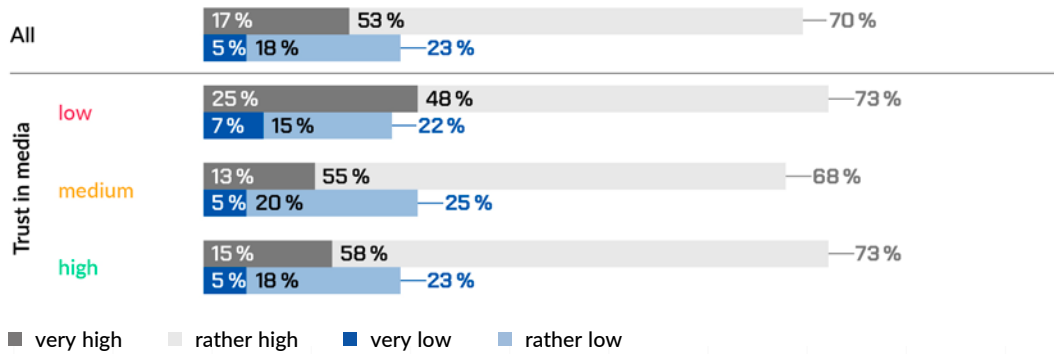
Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.

Strikingly, respondents with medium levels of trust in media were slightly less likely to rate the risk to others as being high (68 %). Moreover, in what is another noticeable difference, one-quarter of people with low levels of media trust explicitly rate this risk as being very high. Overall, however, members of all three levels of trust in media assess the risk similarly. Unsurprisingly, mirroring the assessment of personal risk levels, the respondents who reported frequently encountering disinformation in recent months stand out. A striking 82 % of this group, significantly above the average, perceived other individuals as being at high risk of being influenced by disinformation.

Regardless of their political positioning, a significant majority of all respondents rated the risk for others as being high. This included 68 % of those in the political center, 72 % of those on the self-described political right, and 77 % of those on the self-identified political left. A look at voting preferences shows that likely Green party voters (80 %) were the most likely to see others as being at high risk, while likely CDU/CSU and AfD voters were somewhat less prone to do so (69 % each). Based purely on this data, it remains unclear whether respondents primarily overestimate their own capacities, or whether these results reflect a disproportionate level of attention to the supposed influence of disinformation.

6.2 Disinformation as a societal problem

A large majority of respondents indicated that disinformation on the internet was a problem for society in addition to being a personal risk or a risk to others (see Figure 30). About one-half of survey participants (52 %) said that it was a rather big problem, and about one-third (32 %) went as far as classifying it as a very big problem. This accords with a recent expert survey on the most severe global risks, in which respondents identified disinformation, as well as social and political polarization following extreme weather events, as the most substantial risks (World Economic Forum 2024).

Figure 30: Disinformation as a societal problem

To what extent do you think disinformation on the internet is a problem for our society?

■ very big problem   ▢ rather big problem   ▢ rather minor problem   ■ no problem
▢ don't know
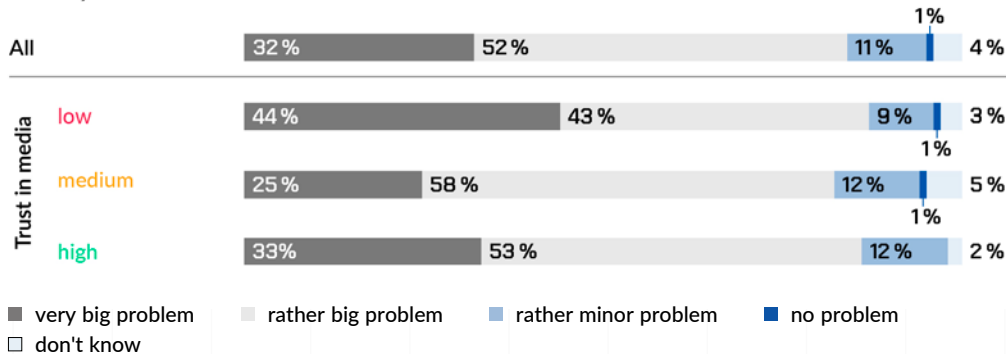
Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Once again, the disparity is evident among respondents with varying levels of trust in the media. Those with low levels of trust (44 %) expressed a significantly higher concern about disinformation being a very big problem for society compared to those with high (33 %) or medium (25 %) levels of trust in media. Examining the left-right political spectrum reveals a recurring pattern: 36 % of respondents identifying as left-leaning, and 34 % of those self-identifying as right-leaning, agreed that disinformation was a very significant societal problem. Among respondents in the political center, the figure was lower, at 29 %. Likely voters for the AfD (39 %), the Greens (38 %) and the Left party (35 %) were particularly likely to see disinformation as a very big problem for society.

However, simply assessing the degree to which disinformation is a problem for society does not yet identify the actual nature of this problem. With the aim of identifying opposing patterns of reasoning, respondents were presented with a pair of contrasting statements and asked to decide which of the two they agreed with more (see Figure 31). While a very clear majority (81 %) said that they agreed more strongly with the statement that disinformation is a threat to social cohesion and democracy, solely 13 % opted for the opposite statement, namely, that disinformation was primarily a term used to discredit alternative opinions and present them as being untrustworthy.

Figure 31: Disinformation as real problem or weaponized term

Which view do you tend to agree with?

| | All | Trust in media | | |
		low	medium	high
Disinformation is a genuine problem and poses a **threat to social cohesion and democracy.**	81 %	69 %	81 %	95 %
Disinformation is just a term used to discredit alternative opinions and portray them as untrustworthy.	13 %	26 %	12 %	2 %

Sample: All respondents (half sample). Missing values: don't know.

The group with a high level of trust in media had a very clear position in this regard. A staggering 95 % of these respondents saw disinformation as a threat to cohesion and democracy. Hardly any

members of this group (2 %) preferred the statement describing disinformation as a term used as a political weapon. In comparison, the group with low levels of trust in media showed less consistency in their opinions. Specifically, although more than two-thirds of these respondents (69 %) also said disinformation presented a threat to cohesion and democracy, about one-quarter agreed with the statement that the term is primarily intended to discredit other opinions (26 %). Moreover, agreement with the statement that disinformation is a term primarily used as a weapon against other opinions increases as we go from the political left to the political right. Just 6 % of respondents who positioned themselves on the political left chose this statement, as compared to 13 % of respondents who located themselves in the center and 23 % of respondents on the self-defined political right.

A parallel examination of voting intentions again reveals noteworthy distinctions, notably among likely AfD voters, where 32 % of this group favored the view portraying disinformation as a term used to discredit other opinions. Conversely, likely Green party voters displayed strong rejection of this perspective, with 94 % of them instead endorsing the statement depicting disinformation as a threat to social cohesion and democracy.

When examining the use of messaging services and social media platforms, it is notable that Telegram users (30 %) and X / Twitter users (26 %) considered disinformation to be a term used as a political weapon more frequently than others. However, regardless of respondents' varying attitudes toward politics and media, it is clear that a majority of people view disinformation as a threat to social cohesion and democracy rather than a pejorative term intended to discredit other opinions.

Given the widespread recognition of the issue and the prevailing consensus that disinformation undermines social cohesion and democracy, it is unsurprising that over half of all respondents (54 %) believe that the topic of disinformation does not receive adequate attention (refer to Figure 32). Only 20 % felt that it receives the appropriate level of attention, while a mere 16 % believed that too much focus is placed on the topic.

Figure 32: Attention to disinformation

And does the topic of disinformation on the internet get ...?

Trust in media

| | too much attention | just the right amount of attention | too little attention |

All: 17 %, 20 %, 54 %
low: 26 %, 18 %, 49 %
medium: 16 %, 23 %, 51 %
high: 10 %, 18 %, 66 %

■ too much attention   ■ just the right amount of attention   ■ too little attention

Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.
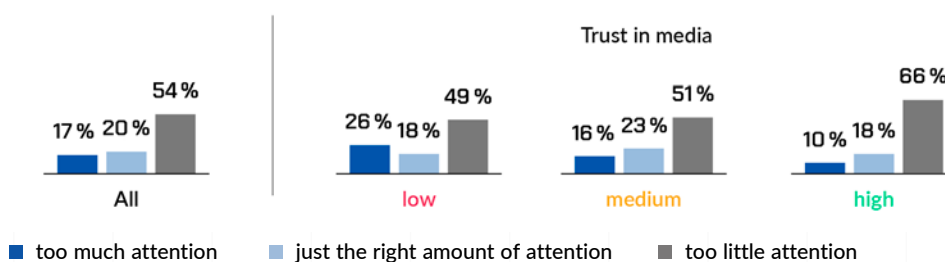
A particularly large share (66 %) of respondents with high levels of trust in media expressed the belief that more attention needs to be devoted to addressing the problem of disinformation. Conversely, an above-average share (26 %) of respondents in the group with low levels of trust in media stated that the topic already receives too much attention. Nonetheless, approximately half of this low-trust group (49 %) still indicated that more attention was warranted. A divide is also evident along the left-right political spectrum, as 67 % of respondents who classified themselves as left-leaning said that the topic receives too little attention, while 11 % said that it receives too much. By contrast, among respondents on the political right, only 48 % said that it receives too little attention, while 20 % said it receives too much. A look at voter groups also shows that likely
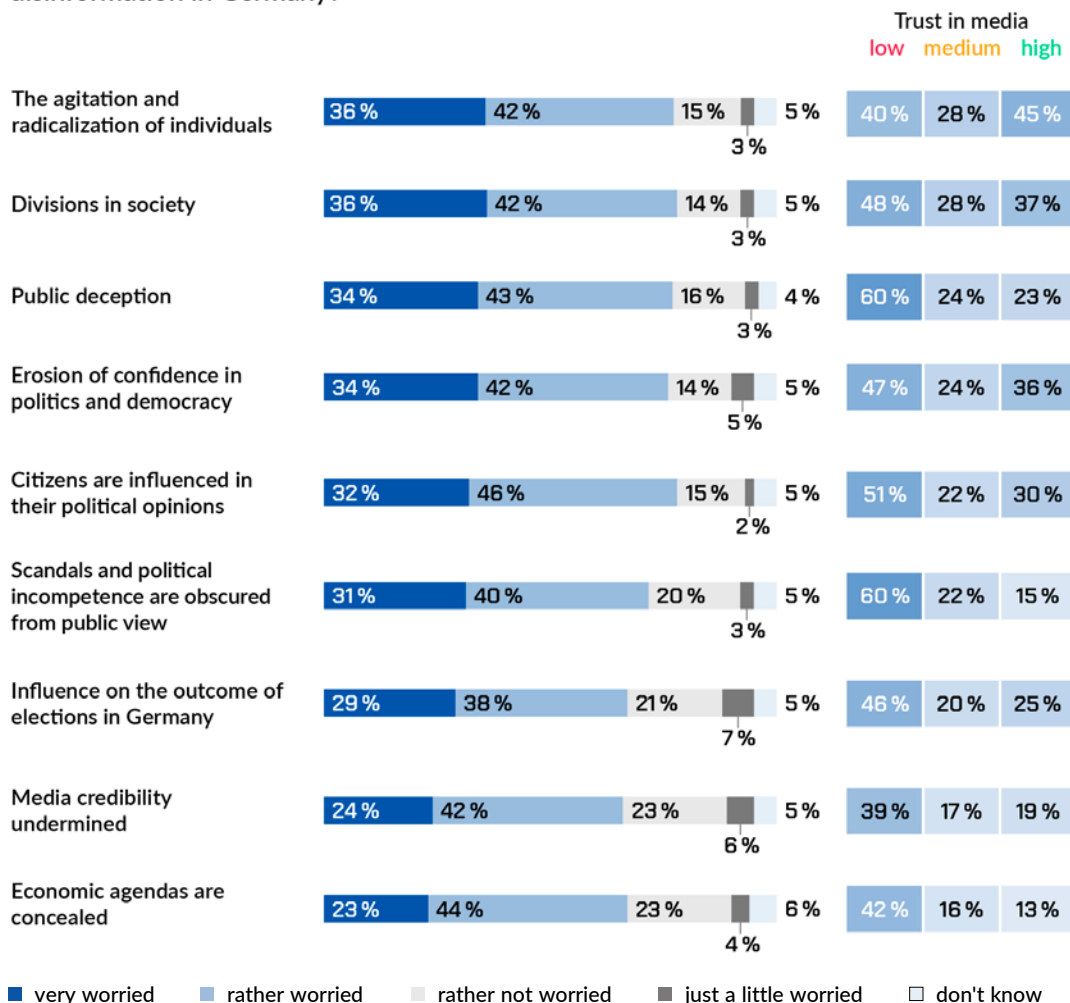
Green party voters most clearly (70 %) agreed with the criticism that the topic does not receive enough attention. Likely AfD voters were the most prone to agree with the opposite position, namely, that current levels of attention are too high (24 %). This finding is hardly surprising given the polarizing role that the AfD plays in Germany's public discourse as well as the ongoing investigations into the party's potentially unconstitutional activities.

6.3 Concern about the societal impact of disinformation

As part of the study, respondents were asked how worried they were about nine different potential societal consequences of disinformation. For each of the consequences, between 67 % and 78 % of respondents overall expressed either a rather worried or very worried sentiment (see Figure 33). Only a minority of individuals reported not being particularly concerned. A more detailed look at those who deemed themselves to be very worried will therefore be more useful for our analysis.

Figure 33: Concerns about possible consequences of disinformation

How worried are you about the following things regarding disinformation in Germany?

	very worried	rather worried	rather not worried	just a little worried	don't know	Trust in media low	medium	high
The agitation and radicalization of individuals	36 %	42 %	15 %	3 %	5 %	40 %	28 %	45 %
Divisions in society	36 %	42 %	14 %	3 %	5 %	48 %	28 %	37 %
Public deception	34 %	43 %	16 %	3 %	4 %	60 %	24 %	23 %
Erosion of confidence in politics and democracy	34 %	42 %	14 %	5 %	5 %	47 %	24 %	36 %
Citizens are influenced in their political opinions	32 %	46 %	15 %	2 %	5 %	51 %	22 %	30 %
Scandals and political incompetence are obscured from public view	31 %	40 %	20 %	3 %	5 %	60 %	22 %	15 %
Influence on the outcome of elections in Germany	29 %	38 %	21 %	7 %	5 %	46 %	20 %	25 %
Media credibility undermined	24 %	42 %	23 %	6 %	5 %	39 %	17 %	19 %
Economic agendas are concealed	23 %	44 %	23 %	4 %	6 %	42 %	16 %	13 %

Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %. For trust in media, the depicted values are very worried / rather worried.

More than one-third of all respondents (36 %) said that they were very worried that individuals would be agitated and radicalized by disinformation. A similar share said that they were very worried that disinformation would contribute to divisions within society. Given that respondents overall indicated that they had encountered disinformation most often on topics that are very socially divisive, this finding is not very surprising.

The group with high levels of trust in media appeared notably concerned about the radicalization of individuals, with 45 % of its members saying that they were very worried about this possibility. At the same time, this was the only area in which the group with low levels of trust in media did not have the highest shares of "very worried" responses. The corresponding figure for this latter group was 40 %. The declining levels of worry along the left-to-right political spectrum are also striking. About 43 % of self-described left-leaning respondents said they were very worried about the radicalization of individuals, as compared to 34 % of self-identified centrists and just 31 % of respondents on the political right.

The prospect of societal division, on the other hand, clearly concerned the group with low levels of trust in media. While about 48 % of these respondents indicated that they were very worried about this possibility, the corresponding proportion was clearly lower, at 37 %, among those with high levels of trust in media and at just 28 % in the group with medium levels of trust in media. A similar pattern can be seen if we look across the left–to-right political spectrum. Here, respondents who considered themselves to be on the political left (very worried: 39 %) and those who described themselves as being on the political right (38 %) showed the greatest concern, while self-described centrists were slightly less troubled (at 34 %).

Members of the group with low levels of trust in media were particularly concerned that citizens would be deceived by disinformation. Members of this group are more likely to see disinformation as a systematic influence exerted by politicians and the media rather than by individuals. This stance was reflected in the 60 % of low-trust respondents who said that they were very worried about citizens being deceived. Indeed, this possibility represents one of this group's two biggest concerns with respect to disinformation. In comparison, relatively few respondents with medium (24 %) or high (23 %) levels of trust in media said that they were very worried about this possibility. Differences across the political spectrum can also be clearly identified: 27 % of those on the self-described political left, 35 % of self-identified centrists, and 42 % of those who described themselves as right-leaning said that they were very worried that citizens would be deceived. Likely AfD voters' high levels of concern here were also striking, as 57 % of the members of this group said that they were very worried about this prospect. In some cases, this was more than twice the size of the corresponding shares of the likely voters for other parties, which ranged between 21 % and 28 %.

A total of 34 % of all respondents also indicated that they were very worried that disinformation would erode trust in politics and democracy. Within the group with low levels of trust in media, the share that felt this way (47 %) was significantly higher than it was among those with high (36 %) or medium (24 %) levels of trust. Along the left-right political spectrum, centrists proved comparatively less concerned about this prospect (very worried: 31 %), with higher shares evident among respondents on the political left and right (35 % and 39 %, respectively).

Interestingly, those who already expressed a low level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy appeared particularly concerned that disinformation would have a negative impact on trust in democracy and politics. Among respondents with a low level of satisfaction with democracy's functioning, a substantial 43 % expressed being very worried about this prospect.

In comparison, the figure was notably lower at 27 % among respondents with medium levels of satisfaction and 29 % among those with high levels of satisfaction with democracy's functioning. The possibility that disinformation might influence citizens' political opinions was seen as very worrying by 32 % of respondents. Among those with low levels of trust in media, more than half (51 %) felt this way. The share of respondents with a high level of trust in media who were similarly anxious about this issue was significantly lower, at just 30 %. Among those with medium levels of trust in media, 22 % said that they were very worried about this potential consequence. Among respondents who located themselves on the left or in the center of the political spectrum, the shares expressing this level of concern were of average size. However, respondents on the self-described political right deviated from this pattern, with 38 % saying that this potential outcome was very worrying. Likely AfD voters once again represented an outlier, with 46 % of this group saying that they were very worried about this prospect.

Overall, respondents with low levels of trust in media were more likely to assume that the motive for disinformation was to draw attention away from scandals and political incompetence. Unsurprisingly, this was also one of the two biggest concerns within the low-trust group, with 60 % of these respondents saying that they were very worried about such distractions. Among those with medium levels of trust in media, the corresponding figure was just 20 %, and among those with high levels, it was only 15 %. Another clear trend emerges as we move from the left to the right of the political spectrum. Among self-described left-leaning respondents, 22 % expressed being very worried about disinformation-driven distractions, which was only half as large as the corresponding share among right-leaning participants (44 %). Political centrists, standing in the middle, exhibited a 31 % very worried response rate concerning disinformation as a distraction. Notably, the highest such share was found among likely AfD voters, with 60 % expressing significant concern about this potential consequence. Among likely voters for the Left party, the corresponding figure was 32 %. Otherwise, the shares ranged from 22 % among likely CDU/CSU voters to 17 % among likely Green party voters.

Could disinformation influence the outcome of elections in Germany? A total of 29 % of all respondents said that they were very worried about this prospect. At 46 %, this share was again highest within the group with low levels of trust in media. The groups with medium and high levels of media trust appeared significantly less concerned about this, with respective shares of 25 % and 20 % indicating that they found this possibility very worrying. Again, the results for left-leaning respondents and political centrists hovered around the average level, while right-leaning respondents stood out: with 35 % of this latter group stating that they were very worried that disinformation could influence election outcomes. This share was also particularly high among likely AfD voters, at 45 %, with likely Green party voters following, at 30 %. The likely voters for other parties had below-average shares of people saying they were very worried about this prospect, with proportions ranging between 23 % and 24 %.

The high proportion of likely AfD voters showing concern in this area again comes as little surprise. The party itself was a source of disinformation as it sought to fuel doubts about the legality of the 2021 Bundestag elections. Among its other tactics, the AfD pointed to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, echoing the accusations of electoral manipulation there and saying that similar activities were possible in Germany (Fiedler 2021). The party targeted postal voting. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a record increase in postal voters was expected. The AfD warned against this, arguing that postal votes could be more easily manipulated, and that votes for its candidates could be illegally allocated to other parties. In approaches such as this, the party establishes plausible connections, but reinterprets them to fit its specific arguments. For instance, the party advocates for voting at local polling stations, thereby increasing the proportion of AfD

voters who cast their ballots in person. Meanwhile, it interprets the relatively low share of its supporters appearing in postal vote statistics as indicative of manipulation and fraud.

At 24 % overall, the proportion of respondents who said that they were very worried about a decline in the credibility of the media was rather low, at least as compared to the other possible consequences of disinformation. Notably, those who already had low levels of trust in media appeared most concerned, with 39 % saying that they were very worried about this prospect. Among respondents with medium or high levels of media trust, the corresponding share was significantly lower, at just 17 % each. Once again, we see a pattern in which those on the self-described political left and those in the political center deviate only minimally from the average, with 22 % of each group saying this potential outcome was very worrying, while the corresponding share among those on the self-described political right was significantly higher, at 30 %. Likely AfD voters particularly stand out again here, with 38 % saying this prospect was very worrying. Only 16 % to 21 % of the likely voters for other parties expressed similar levels of concern.

The proportion of respondents expressing being very worried about disinformation's role in concealing economic interests was the lowest overall, at just 23 %. However, among the group with low levels of trust in media, a higher percentage (42 %) found this potential consequence to be very worrying compared to the other two groups. In addition, the share rises as we look from left to right along the self-classified political spectrum. A total of 19 % of left-leaning respondents found this prospect to be very worrying, along with 23 % of those in the political center and 27 % of those who self-identify as right-leaning. Likely AfD voters were the most prone to concern here, with 38 % saying this prospect was very worrying, followed by likely voters for the Left party (23 %). The lowest such share was among likely FDP voters, only 10 % of whom said that they regarded this possibility as very worrying.

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7. Comparison with the United States

In recent years, the debate about disinformation has become increasingly charged on both sides of the Atlantic. This is largely due to former U.S. President Donald Trump, whose rhetoric about "fake news" has both drawn global attention to the phenomenon and turned the expression into a political weapon. International and comparative studies show that national characteristics play an important role in approaches to disinformation. For example, an EU-wide survey conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in March 2023 showed that levels of uncertainty regarding the accuracy of online information, as well as overall perceptions of disinformation, varied between citizens of different EU member states — in some cases considerably (Unzicker 2023). In addition to its primary focus on Germany, our study also looks at the United States, which allows us to identify similarities and differences between the two countries. To this end, alongside the survey conducted in Germany, a parallel survey representative of the general population was conducted in the United States, with a significant portion of the same questions asked in both countries. A comparative analysis of the survey data reveals common patterns across both countries, while also highlighting differences in perceptions of and responses to disinformation.

Perceptions of uncertainty and disinformation

While around half of the respondents in Germany stated that they had often been unsure in recent months regarding the accuracy of information found online, this proportion rose to two-thirds among survey participants in the United States (see Figure 34). There, specifically the share of men who stated they had often been uncertain about the accuracy of information was slightly higher than it was among women (+5 percentage points). In Germany, younger respondents were

more likely to say they had felt unsure, while older respondents showed comparatively less un-
certainty. In the United States, both the youngest respondents aged between 16 and 24 (74 %)
and the oldest respondents in the 65-and-above age group (71 %) were most likely to say that
they had often been uncertain about the veracity of online content in recent months. While edu-
cation levels did not play a role in Germany, the share of respondents from the United States who
reported being often unsure rose in parallel with levels of educational attainment.

Figure 34: Uncertainty in the assessment of information in Germany and the United States

In the last few months, how often have you been unsure whether or not a piece of
information you came across on the internet was true or not?

very often   rather often   rarely   very rarely   not at all
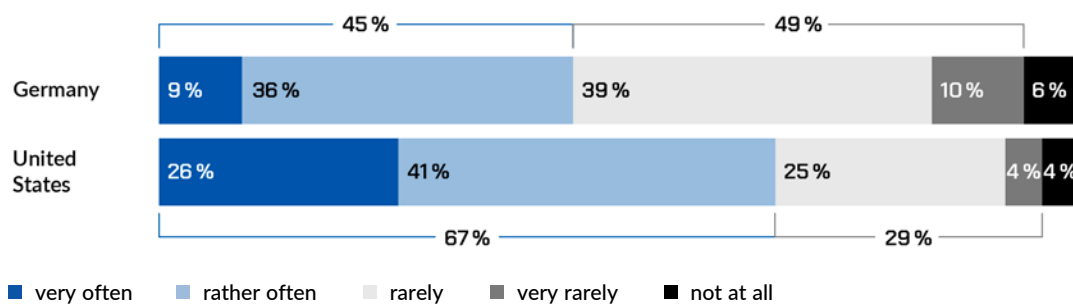
Sample: All respondents.

In addition to indicating that they had more often felt uncertain online, U.S.-based respondents
said that they had perceived disinformation significantly more often than their German counter-
parts. A total of 35 % of Germans, but 61 % of Americans, said that they had encountered delibe-
rately false information online in recent months either very often or rather often (see Figure 35).

Figure 35: Encounters with disinformation in Germany and the United States

In the last few months, how often have you encountered false information on the
internet that was intentionally spread to harm someone or cause uncertainty?

very often   rather often   rarely   very rarely   not at all
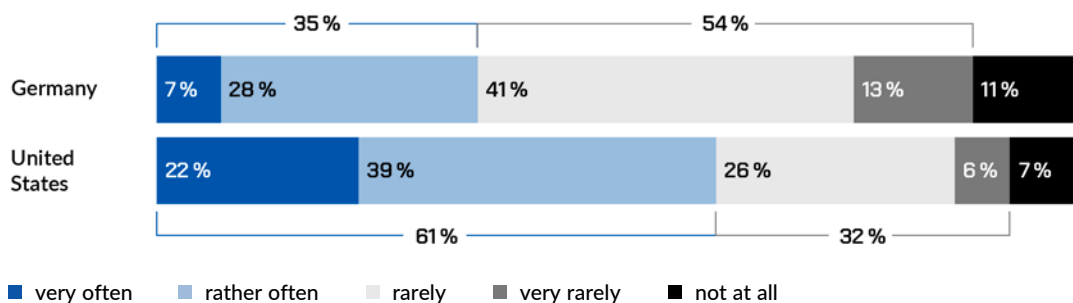
Sample: All respondents.

In both countries, similar demographic groups reported encountering disinformation particularly
frequently: men, younger individuals, and those with high levels of formal educational attain-
ment. In Germany, individuals with low levels of trust in media were more likely than others to
report frequent uncertainty online and encountering disinformation regularly. However, in the
United States, a u-shaped pattern emerges. Individuals with both low and high levels of trust in
media were more inclined than those with medium levels of trust to report feeling unsure about

the accuracy of online information and encountering disinformation frequently.[5] The term "dis-information" was similarly well-known in both countries despite the different frequencies of perception. In each case, 76 % of respondents said that they had heard or read the term.

Dissemination of disinformation

Where do citizens in the United States perceive disinformation particularly often? Asked to specify where they had recently encountered disinformation, the largest shares of respondents in both the United States (62 %) and Germany (59 %) indicated encountering it in posts or comments on social media platforms. A significant proportion of U.S.-based respondents also said that they had seen disinformation in articles on news sites and blogs (42 %) or in the comments below such content (35 %). These sources were also ranked second and third place in Germany, although ordered differently than in the United States. U.S-based-survey participants thus indicated that deliberately false information is more commonly encountered in the articles themselves, while German respondents said that such content was more frequently found in the accompanying comments. The dissemination of disinformation via messaging services by people within users' personal social environments plays a significantly greater role in the United States (see Figure 36). U.S.-based respondents were more than three times as likely (36 %) as respondents in Germany (10 %) to say that they had received such content from within their circle of personal contacts.

Figure 36: Disinformation from within users' personal environments in Germany and the United States

How often have you received disinformation from people from your personal environment via messenger or text message?
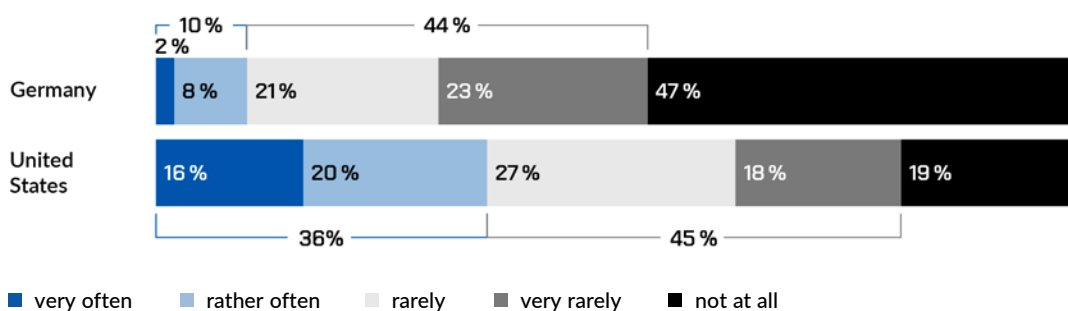
■ very often ■ rather often ▫ rarely ▪ very rarely ■ not at all

Sample: All respondents who use messaging services / SMS. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

Although respondents in the United States indicated that messaging services play a larger role in the dissemination of disinformation than was the case in Germany, U.S.-based survey participants also said that they had encountered disinformation most frequently on social media platforms. However, in order to better be able to classify and compare any differences in the platform-specific perceptions of disinformation, we will first compare media usage in the two countries. Overall, people in the United States use social media platforms more intensively than their German counterparts. For example, 52 % of U.S.-based respondents said that they used TikTok, more than twice

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5   For the U.S.-based respondents, trust in media was measured using only a single indicator: "All in all, you can trust the media's coverage of political issues."

the corresponding share in Germany. U.S.-based survey participants were also more likely to use other platforms, such as Snapchat (+24 percentage points), X / Twitter (+23 percentage points), Facebook and Reddit (+18 percentage points each). Moreover, the United States and Germany noticeably differ not only in terms of usage alone, but also in terms of the intensity of use. A look at the share of respondents who stated that they used the various platforms several times a day shows that all are used more intensively in the United States. U.S.-based respondents thus use various platforms — including YouTube (+24 percentage points), Facebook (+20 percentage points), TikTok (+19 percentage points), Snapchat (+15 percentage points) and X / Twitter (+13 percentage points) — much more frequently than the German survey participants.

Even if we compare only the intensive users of the various social media platforms in Germany and the United States, differences in the perception of disinformation persist (see Figure 37).[6] As in Germany, U.S.-based respondents said that X / Twitter, Facebook and TikTok were among the platforms on which they had most often encountered disinformation. However, a majority of the respective platforms' intensive users in the United States also said that they had often perceived disinformation on Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. On average, respondents in the United States said that they had encountered disinformation on the various platforms significantly more often than was the case in Germany regardless of the different patterns of media usage. This difference was particularly clear for Snapchat (+42 percentage points), YouTube (+19 percentage points) and Instagram (+19 percentage points). The two countries' respondents only offered a broadly similar assessment for TikTok.

Figure 37: Disinformation on social media in Germany and the United States

How often have you encountered disinformation on the following social media?

■ Germany ■ USA
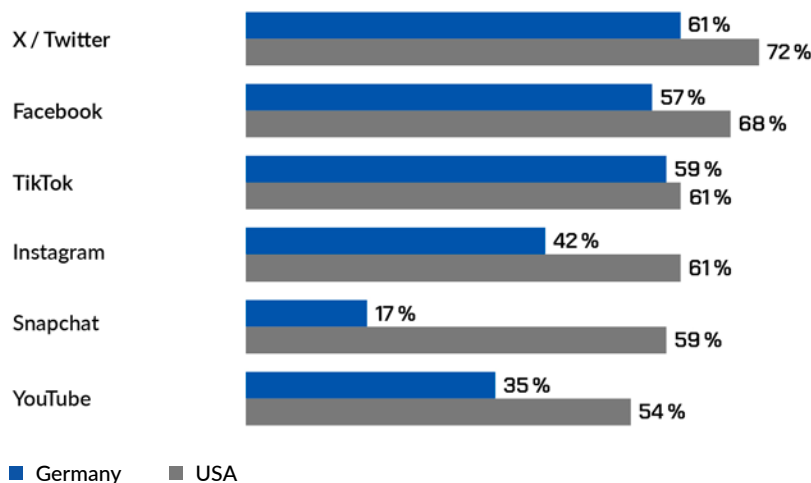
Sample: All respondents who use a given platform several times a day, and who stated that they had encountered disinformation on the internet in the last few months. Values shown: very often / rather often. Missing values: rarely / very rarely / not at all.

The questions regarding the perceived origin of disinformation — asking whether respondents believe it comes primarily from within the country or from abroad, or from left-leaning / liberal or right-leaning/conservative entities — suggest that the United States are more polarized than

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6   In this graphic, we only include those social media platforms that are available and frequently used in both countries.

Germany. In the former, fewer respondents saw disinformation as originating in equal measure from both domestic and foreign sources, or — separately queried — equally from liberal and conservative entities. In contrast, the percentage of those that attributed disinformation to a particular source primarily was higher in the United States.

In the United States, disinformation was much more frequently regarded as a home-grown issue: 39 % of U.S.-based respondents said that they thought such content came primarily from domestic actors, compared to 24 % in Germany (see Figure 38). Only 11 % of U.S. citizens saw foreign actors as the primary source, as compared to 16 % of Germans. However, relative majorities in both countries — 44 % of respondents in the United States and 50 % in Germany — said that they thought domestic and foreign actors bore responsibility in equal measure.

Figure 38: Perceived domestic and foreign origins of disinformation in Germany and the United States

What do you think, does disinformation originate more often from ...?

	Domestic actors	Foreign actors	Equally from both	don't know
Germany	24 %	50 %	16 %	9 %
United States	39 %	44 %	11 %	5 %
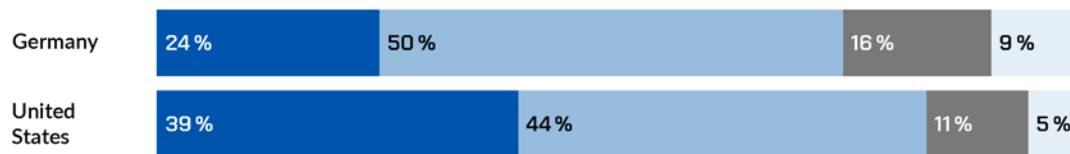
■ Domestic actors   ■ Foreign actors   ■ Equally from both   ☐ don't know

Sample: All respondents. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

When asked which side of the political spectrum they believed produced more disinformation, 25 % of Germans and 23 % of Americans said that it came more often from the political right or conservative side. In contrast, only 10 % of respondents in Germany, but 25 % in the United States, pointed a finger at the political left or liberal side. In Germany, 55 % of respondents said that they thought disinformation came from both sides to the same extent, as did 46 % of respondents in the United States. This is another indication that the United States is more polarized than Germany.

However, respondents in both countries tended to suspect actors from the opposite political pole of spreading disinformation.

Figure 39: Disinformation originators by assumed location on political spectrum in Germany and the United States

What do you think, does disinformation originate more often from ...?

	Actors on the political left / liberal side	Equally from both ends of political spectrum	Actors on the political right / conservative side	don't know
Germany	10 %	55 %	25 %	10 %
United States	25 %	46 %	23 %	6 %

■ Actors on the political left / liberal side   ■ Equally from both ends of political spectrum
■ Actors on the political right / conservative side   ☐ don't know

Sample: All respondents.

In Germany, respondents said that they had most often encountered disinformation on the topics of "immigration and refugees" (53 % said they had done so in recent months), "health and COVID-19" (53 %), "the war in Ukraine" (51 %), "politics and elections" (50 %), and "climate change and natural disasters" (47 %). In the United States, on the other hand, the largest share of respondents said that they had encountered disinformation on the topic of "politics and elections" (54 %).

This is hardly surprising given the false allegations of election manipulation by Donald Trump and a majority of Republicans following the 2020 U.S. presidential election. This conspiracy narrative, known as the "Big Lie," has been propagated by a large majority of Republicans despite the lack of any solid evidence (Barrett 2022). In U.S. respondents' assessments of this topic, there was no initial difference in terms of party affiliation. Democrats, Republicans and independents all said that they had encountered disinformation on the topic of "politics and elections" roughly as often. However, a more interesting view emerges when we add a look at respondents' voting behavior in the 2020 election. In this case, 57 % of Biden voters and 62 % of Trump voters said that they had encountered disinformation on the subject of "politics and elections." The survey data does not allow us to tell exactly what respondents were thinking of when referring to disinformation in this way. However, this example shows that a false claim continuously repeated can ultimately reach many people — and have a serious impact.[7]

In the United States, respondents were particularly likely to see politicians and political parties as key actors in the spread of disinformation (see Figure 40). According to the survey, 68 % of U.S.-based respondents said that they thought domestic politicians and parties were responsible for spreading disinformation either very often or rather often. This was 18 percentage points higher — a very substantial difference — than the comparable level in Germany. On this measure, respondents in the United States did not differ according to party identification or voting behavior in the 2020 presidential election.

German respondents identified protest groups and activists as the primary sources of disinformation (66 %), whereas fewer U.S.-based respondents agreed, indicating a -10-percentage point difference. Overall, U.S.-based respondents highlighted media and political actors as playing a more substantial role in disseminating disinformation. More than half of all U.S.-based respondents said that American media and journalists were responsible for spreading disinformation very often or rather often. A similar share felt that this was also true of the U.S government (58 % in each case). By comparison, only 40 % of German respondents held this opinion about their country's media and journalists, and 34 % with regard to the German government. U.S.-based respondents' perceptions of the role of the media and journalists in spreading disinformation showed no difference based on party identification, nor were there party-based differences with regard to respondents' assessment of their own government's role. More U.S.-based respondents than Germans saw individuals (61 %; +11 percentage points) and businesses (44 %; +14 percentage points) as often being involved in the dissemination of disinformation.

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7   Social media platforms are also frequently criticized in this respect. Donald Trump's Facebook account was suspended following the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. However, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, reactivated his account in January 2023. In addition, on its Facebook and Instagram platforms, Meta is now once again allowing election advertising that casts doubt on the result of the 2020 election (Kühl 2023). This is a particularly charged subject given that internal company documents have come to light indicating that Meta is aware that disinformation spread by politicians can potentially be more dangerous than similar content spread by normal users due to the politicians' influential positions (Timberg et al. 2021).

Figure 40: Dissemination of disinformation by actor in Germany and the United States

In your opinion, how often do the following spread disinformation on the internet or are responsible for it?

Actor	Germany	USA
Protest activists and protest groups	66 %	56 %
Bloggers and influencers	60 %	60 %
Foreign governments	53 %	55 %
Domestic politicians and parties	50 %	68 %
Individuals	50 %	61 %
Foreign media and journalists	45 %	52 %
Domestic media and journalists	40 %	58 %
The government	34 %	58 %
Businesses	30 %	44 %

■ Germany ■ USA
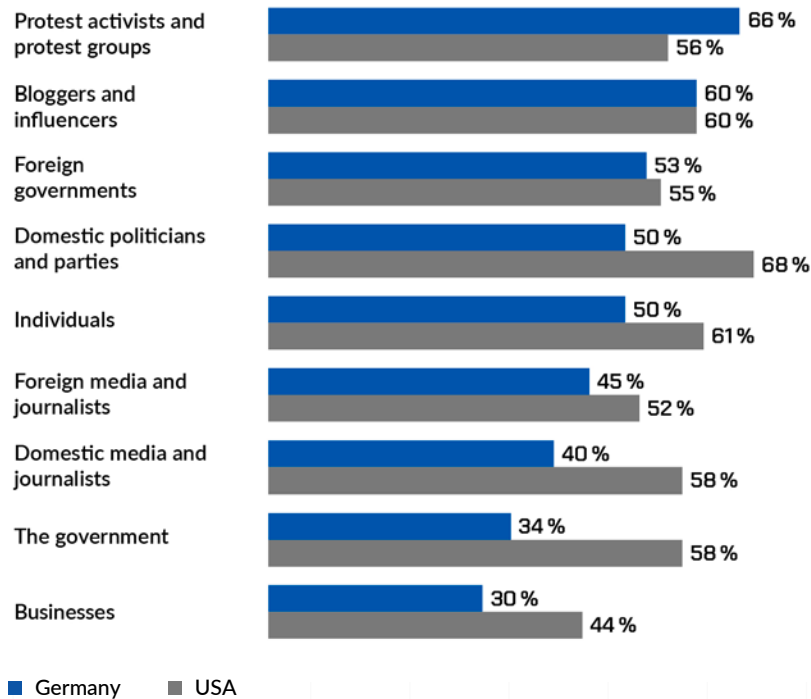
Sample: All respondents. Values shown: very often / rather often. Missing values: rarely / very rarely / not at all / don't know.

Awareness of the issue and concerns

Given the clear differences in the perceptions of disinformation in the two countries, it is reasonable to assume that the respondents also differ in terms of their perceptions of their own and others' susceptibility to disinformation. The share of U.S.-based respondents (72 %) who said that there was a very high or rather high risk that other people's opinions would be influenced by disinformation was close to the one found in Germany (70 %). However, there was a significant difference between the two countries with regard to self-assessments. In the United States, 39 % of respondents said that they themselves were at high risk of being influenced by disinformation, which is more than twice the size of the corresponding share in Germany, where it was only 16 % (see Figure 41).

Although U.S. citizens reported more frequent encounters with disinformation and considered themselves more susceptible to it, they did not necessarily see disinformation as being a more serious problem than German respondents did. In Germany, 84 % of respondents said that they regarded disinformation as a very big or rather big problem. In the United States, 79 % said the same. In both countries, people with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to view disinformation as a big problem.

In contrast to Germany, there was hardly any difference on this measure in the United States between people with differing levels of general trust in media. Similar shares of people with low levels (81 %) and high levels (79 %) of trust in media assessed disinformation as being either a very big or rather big problem. In both cases, these rates were slightly higher than they were among people

with medium levels of trust in media (74 %). The differences were clearer when looking at respondents' trust in social media. U.S.-based survey participants with low levels of trust in social media were more likely to consider disinformation a big problem (86 %) than those who had high levels of trust (78 %). Consequently, U.S.-based respondents' more frequent encounters with disinformation does not automatically translate into greater concern about the phenomenon as a problem. This may also be due to a slightly different understanding of the term among respondents in the United States.

Figure 41: Risk assessment in Germany and the United States

In general, how great do you think the risk is that …?

	… you will be influenced in your opinion on a topic by disinformation?	… others will be influenced in their opinion on a topic by disinformation?
Germany	2 % 14 % —16 % / 30 % 48 % —78 %	17 % 57 % —70 % / 5 % 18 % —23 %
United States	15 % 24 % —39 % / 25 % 32 % —57 %	26 % 46 % —72 % / 5 % 18 % —23 %

■ very high   ■ rather high   ■ very low   ■ rather low
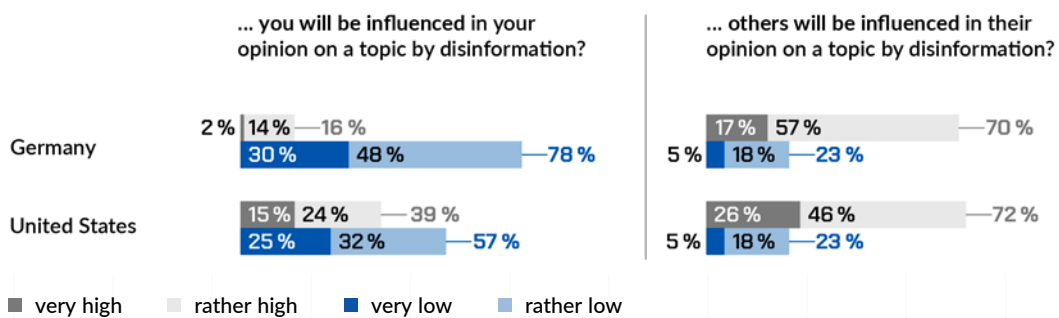
Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.

Only 13 % of respondents in Germany said that they thought disinformation was merely a term used to discredit alternative opinions (see Figure 42). In the United States, this proportion was almost twice as high, at around one-quarter of all respondents. There, use of the term "disinformation" was more often seen as a means of making alternative opinions appear untrustworthy. Donald Trump and his "fake news" rhetoric are undoubtedly crucial factors in this difference.

Figure 42: Disinformation as real problem or weaponized term in Germany and the United States

Which view do you tend to agree with?

	Germany	United States
Disinformation is a genuine problem and poses a **threat to social cohesion and democracy.**	81 %	67 %
Disinformation is just a term used to discredit alternative opinions **and portray them as untrustworthy.**	13 %	25 %

Sample: All respondents (half sample in Germany). Missing values: don't know.

In Germany, agreement with the statement that the term "disinformation" is used to discredit alternative opinions increased linearly from the political left (6 %) through the center (13 %) to the right (23 %). Contrastingly, in the United States, slightly more self-identified Democrats and Republicans (each 26 %) than independents (23 %) regarded the term primarily as a rhetorical weapon.

Given that one-quarter of Americans see disinformation primarily as a term used to discredit other opinions, it is not surprising that a higher proportion of the population in the United States also believes that the topic receives too much attention (see Figure 43). While a majority (54 %)

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in Germany said that too little attention is paid to the issue, only 37 % of U.S.-based respondents shared this view. In the United States, 28 % of respondents said that they thought the issue received an excessive amount of attention, compared to just 17 % in Germany. In addition, 30 % of respondents in the United States said that the topic receives just the right amount of attention, whereas this proportion was 20 % in Germany.

Figure 43: Attention to disinformation in Germany and the United States

And does the topic of disinformation on the internet get...?

- ■ too much attention   ■ just the right amount of attention   ■ too little attention

Sample: All respondents. Missing values: don't know.
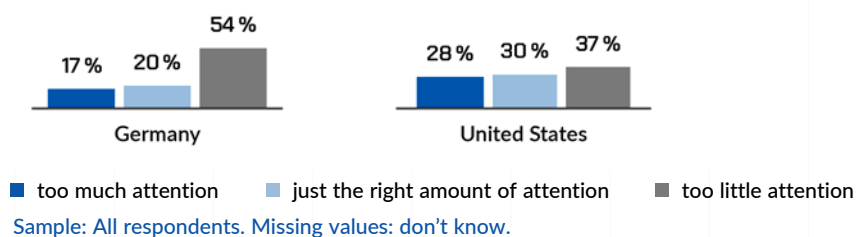
In the United States, too, a significant proportion of respondents said that they were either very worried or rather worried about specific consequences of disinformation. Survey participants showed the most concern about the prospect that disinformation could contribute to societal divisions and the least concern about the possibility that the media would lose credibility. Thus, respondents in the United States and Germany appeared to have similarly pronounced apprehensions about the specific consequences of disinformation.

Responding to disinformation

According to their own self-assessments, U.S. citizens encounter disinformation on the internet more frequently than their German counterparts. For this reason, when analyzing how respondents respond to disinformation, we compare only those respondents in both countries that stated that they had perceived disinformation very often or rather often in recent months.

The examination shows that U.S. citizens in this group tend to take a more active approach than Germans when it comes to responding to disinformation. They more often reach out to the source of the content to verify its truth (+8 percentage points), and they utilize fact-checking services significantly more often than their counterparts in Germany (48 % vs. 19 %). In comparison, a slightly larger share of respondents in Germany said that they had conducted their own personal research to verify potentially false information (74 % vs. 69 %). U.S. citizens are also more active when it comes to the dissemination of disinformation, whether intentionally or unintentionally (see Figure 44). Among U.S.-based respondents who said that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation in recent months, 39 % stated that they had themselves inadvertently disseminated false information online, compared to 15 % in Germany. This finding corresponds with the observation that U.S. citizens perceive themselves to be more susceptible to disinformation. In addition, 25 % of U.S.-based respondents in this category stated that they had themselves deliberately spread disinformation, compared to just 5 % in Germany. While the deliberate spread of disinformation seems to be a marginal phenomenon in Germany, a significant proportion of citizens in the United States deliberately participate in the dissemination of false information.

Figure 44: Intentional and unintentional dissemination of disinformation in Germany and the United States

Please indicate whether or not you have done the following things. I have …
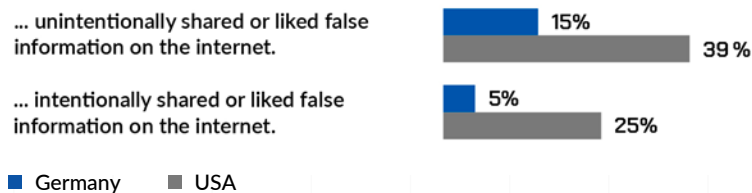
... unintentionally shared or liked false information on the internet. — Germany 15%, USA 39%

... intentionally shared or liked false information on the internet. — Germany 5%, USA 25%

■ Germany ■ USA

Sample: All respondents who stated that they had very often or rather often encountered disinformation in the last few months. Missing values: don't know.

The differences are smaller when it comes to preventing the spread of disinformation. Among the group of U.S.-based respondents who said that they had regularly encountered disinformation, 45 % stated that they had reached out to the sender(s) to inform them that they were spreading false information. The comparable figure in Germany was 44 %. In the United States, 45 % of these respondents said that they had reported content or accounts as being misleading, compared to 40 % in Germany.

Overall, this comparison between the United States and Germany reveals several differences. U.S.-based respondents report greater levels of uncertainty, disinformation is more prevalent there, and several areas provide clear evidence of polarization. For example, U.S.-based survey participants were more likely to attribute responsibility for disinformation to entities from the political pole opposite to their own. A majority of U.S.-based respondents also suspected that their own government was often responsible for spreading disinformation. Although clearly a minority opinion in Germany, this belief was shared by a significant majority in the United States. The consequences of the spread of disinformation are particularly visible in the political sphere and with regard to elections. The topic area of "politics and elections" was more frequently associated with disinformation in the United States than in Germany, and the share of people who said they were very worried about elections being influenced by disinformation was also higher in the United States.

Nevertheless, awareness of the issue as a problem is comparably high in both countries, although a larger proportion of the U.S. population believes that the topic receives too much attention. This is partially due to a slightly different understanding of the term among U.S.-based respondents. In the United States, some political forces have long used the term "disinformation" and the closely associated "fake news" label as rhetorical weapons meant to stir up distrust toward the media and politicians as well as to discredit (legitimate) criticism of their own positions. In the United States, the share of people who believe that the term is only used to discredit other opinions is about twice as large as it is in Germany, comprising around one-quarter of respondents. Nevertheless, while a similar proportion of respondents in both countries say that other people have a high risk of being influenced by disinformation, U.S. citizens are more likely to believe that they themselves are also susceptible to such influence.

In the United States, people take a more active approach when it comes to responding to disinformation, which is in part due to their more frequent encounters with the phenomenon. They reach out more often to the sender(s) of information with questions about the veracity of content, and they utilize fact-checking services much more frequently, whereas respondents in Germany perform their own research somewhat more often. Surprisingly, however, U.S.-based

respondents were also more likely to admit that they had deliberately spread disinformation themselves. While the two countries certainly have different political cultures overall, the differences found here can presumably also be attributed to the greater levels of political polarization in the United States. In Chapter 1, we addressed the connection between disinformation and polarization. These two phenomena have a complex reciprocal relationship: Disinformation can reinforce political polarization, and a polarized political climate facilitates the spread and acceptance of disinformation.

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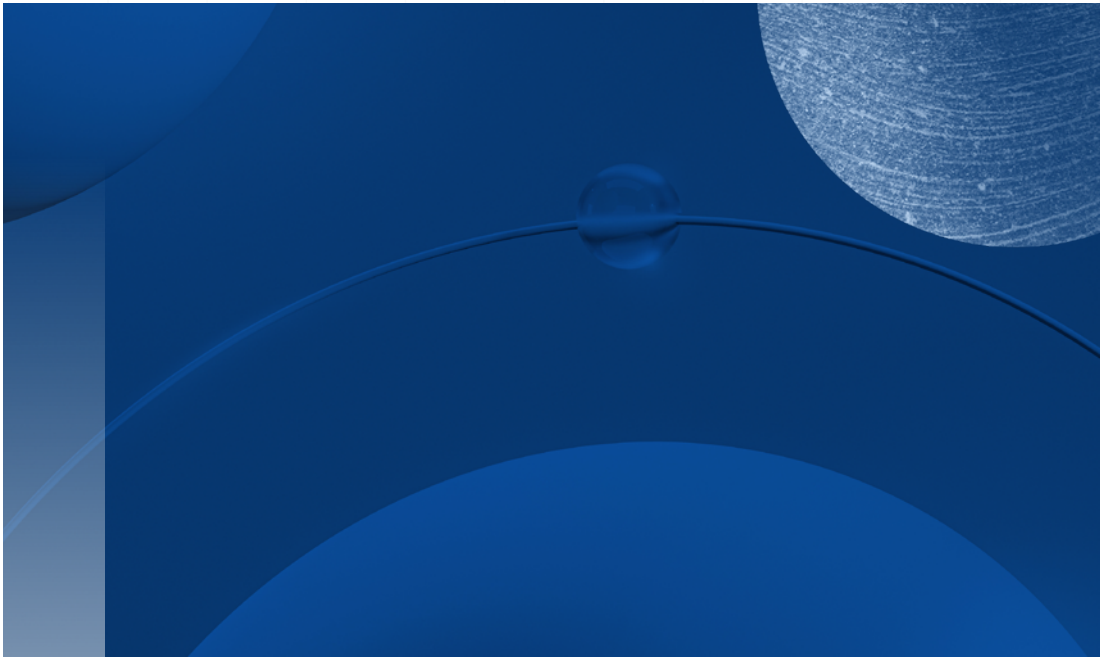
8. Conclusion

As a society, how well prepared are we for the challenges posed by disinformation in the 2024 super election year? The results of our study show that people have become aware of the phenomenon. At least at the societal level, they have recognized the risks to democracy and cohesion associated with the deliberate and manipulative dissemination of false information.

On the individual level, people tend to think that others in particular are susceptible to being influenced by disinformation, but that they themselves are immune — although this feeling is more pronounced in Germany than in the United States. However, the apparent consensus among the population regarding the harmful consequences of disinformation campaigns may be deceptive. The survey results also offer several indications that different population groups may have something different in mind when they use the term "disinformation." This is especially evident in the differences between those with high and low levels of trust in media, which can be seen running through the entire study. This is particularly clear in the results from the United States, which plainly show the emergence of societal divisions and the formation of political camps. The picture looks somewhat different in Germany, at least today.

When dealing with controversial topics, it is extremely important to get the facts right. This is especially true in the run-up to elections when it is particularly crucial to be able to gauge the direction of public opinion. However, respondents reported that they had encountered disinformation with particular frequency on the topics of "migration," "war," "climate change" and "elections." Thus, our results remind us once again that it is important to communicate transparently, seriously and truthfully within these hotly contested political arenas in order to minimize the scope for ambiguity and uncertainty. Otherwise, there is a risk of opening the door to disinformation campaigns. This applies to political parties, governments and the media, but also applies on an individual level.

In addition, especially in politically contentious times, it is particularly important that we know where dubious false information is appearing and how much reach it is attaining. Since the present study can only convey the subjective reports of its interviewees, it does not provide any information on the actual prevalence of disinformation in the public discourse or on which topics and on which platforms it is found most often. Although numerous actors are already engaged in collecting and evaluating this data as it relates to social media networks, it remains necessary to further develop and expand independent, trustworthy and diverse disinformation-monitoring activities. Independence and diversity are important because it is only when the data is evaluated by a variety of actors — without ties to the state or business interests — that we can ensure a high degree of public trust in these monitoring processes.

On the level of individuals, our results show that a general awareness of the dangers of manipulation through disinformation is not enough if this does not lead to changes in behavior. As long as a majority of citizens primarily regard other people as being susceptible to disinformation's influence, the general risks may be overestimated and the individual risks underestimated. For this reason, informational and awareness-raising measures must focus more strongly on people's own use of media and news sources in addition to conveying the skills necessary to reduce such risks. Above all, however, it should be considered that the aim is to help people become more confident and secure in dealing with information — and not to spread additional uncertainty and concern. For example, the fact that German citizens rarely utilize fact-checking services and rel-atively infrequently respond actively to disinformation by contacting the sender(s), commenting on it or reporting it indicates that there is significant potential in offering very practical pointers to information resources and advice on response options. The high level of awareness of the problem offers a good starting point for training programs offered by the public sector or civil society groups, participatory programs, and other informational materials.

Resilience requires trust. If one result of this study stands out more than others, it is the strong influence of trust in media on almost all aspects of the topic of disinformation. This enables us to draw several conclusions. First, the study shows that there is a relatively large, rather apolitical group with a medium level of trust in media that should be given more attention. In order to preserve the quality of public discourse, it will be crucial to give this middle group more visibility and to ensure that it is heard. To counteract further polarization and growing mistrust, we need to engage this quiet, observant middle more strongly as a contributor to consensus and as a balancing voice. In this regard, journalists have a responsibility to avoid emphasizing only the extremes in their reporting and should instead ensure that they are also giving this rather silent group a voice in societal debates. Second, the strong correlations with levels of trust in media provide further evidence of the importance of an independent and pluralistic media landscape that is guided by criteria of journalistic quality. A functioning media system that takes a critical stance toward politicians and policymakers, offers space for different points of view, and sets high standards for itself will retain the public's trust in the long term. Data from the United States show that it is no longer just the political environment there, but also the media that are today perceived to be polarized and therefore less trustworthy.

It is natural that this study also focuses on social media platforms. They play a central role both in encounters with disinformation and in people's responses to it. A significant portion of our social discourse today takes place on social media platforms. Therefore, they have a corresponding responsibility to help users identify questionable content and find their bearings in the often-confusing flow of information. In the future, fact-checking functions should thus be integrated in a low-threshold and more direct way, such as by technically embedding labels or links on social media platforms. Trust scores on news portals or blogs should also be included more consistently

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and used as labels as soon as they have been independently verified. It should additionally be easier for users to verify and report questionable information. The European Union's Digital Services Act has created a new set of regulations for platforms. This now provides governments with a broad range of instruments that will both make it easier to assess the situation on the various platforms and to react to it with appropriate measures.

Yet, it is critical to remember that this is necessarily a delicate task. Responding to and combating disinformation inevitably creates a tension between protecting people from deliberately false information, on the one hand, and honoring the freedom of expression, on the other. In this study, respondents saw the desire to influence political opinions and the desire to influence elections as the most important motives behind the spread of disinformation. Given these perceptions, it is very important to examine the extent to which regulation can and should intervene in the dissemination of disinformation. However, rather than being just a purely legal or even technological debate, this is something that calls for a broad societal discussion on how best to balance these two risks — the danger of manipulation vs. the danger of infringing on the freedom of expression. One focus must be on safety mechanisms that can prevent well-intentioned regulation from turning into totalitarian control, while also ensuring that a generous respect for the freedom of expression does not devolve into a post-factual "anything goes" environment.

In a future publication, we will build on the results of this study and the considerations expressed here, examining the various approaches to combating disinformation along with mechanisms for improving the culture of online political debate.

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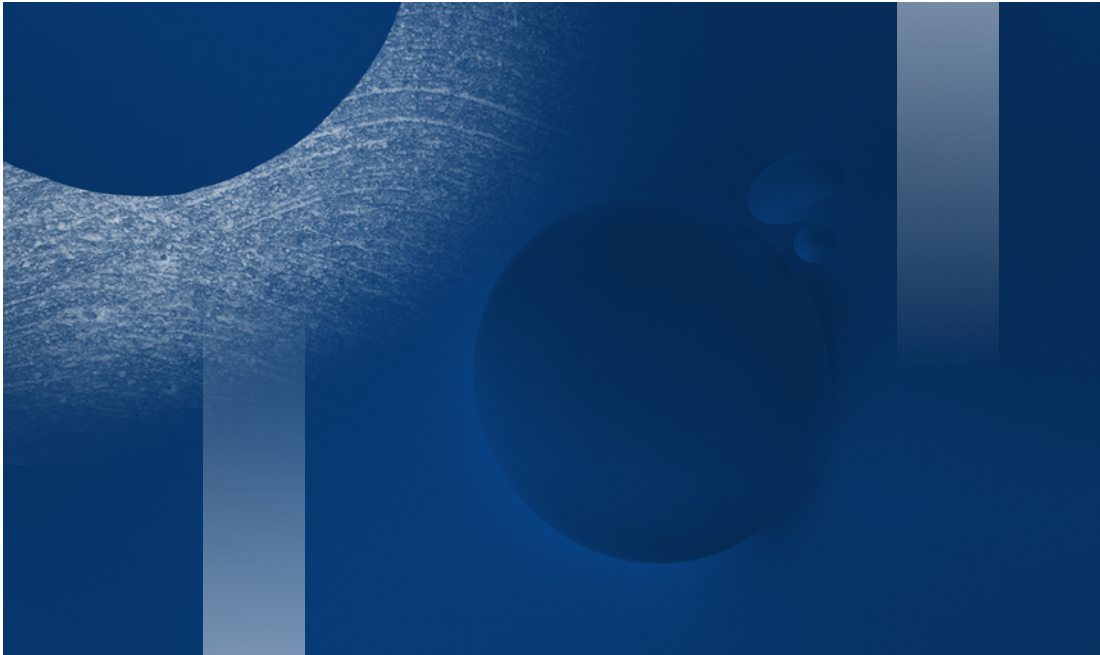
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