Stop fighting misinformation – alternative angles to epistemic conflicts

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Introduction

One rainy Denmark morning in October 2024, I walked into a conference centre in Copenhagen to participate in an event on climate misinformation. It was titled "News Impact Summit: Fighting climate misinformation". I was expecting to hear an overview of the types of climate misinformation that people come across in their lives, accompanied with an analysis on who the supporters of it are, and an educated answer to how journalists should cover and counter this. I guess I hadn't read the program thoroughly enough, since that was not really the content of the event. Most of the summit focused on how to write about climate in a more compelling way – and in some of the key notes, how to write about climate if it gets you in trouble. I will never forget the emergency call recording played by the Romanian film maker Mihai Gavril Dragolea, from when he had been filming illegal logging and had to run away from a group of men armed with axes. "Why are they chasing you", asked the lady on the emergency line repeatedly, as if that was the most urgent question in the situation.

Anyway, the summit was interesting, but it wasn't until the afternoon that climate denialism was first mentioned. In one "breakout session", the Zetland climate journalist Thomas Hebsgaard presented some data from the United States. According to that, around 10 percent of Americans don't believe in climate change. In Hebsgaard's view, that group of people is not the one journalists should really focus on. In the end, they will never change their minds. Someone from the audience said something along the lines of: "Yes, and if we write about them, we give an impression that we should take them seriously!" Everyone seemed to agree.

To my understanding, Hebsgaard was trying to make a wise point: in order to stop climate change that is already exponentially happening, the majority of us cannot prolong the conversation of whether it's man-made or a natural phenomenon or a conspiracy. The science is solid, so we need to focus on the way forward. This is a smart approach for climate journalists, many of whom seem to adopt a role that goes beyond reporting – actively advocating for change in response to the climate crisis.

However, should all of us really ignore that 10 percent denying climate change? That's quite a large number of Americans. I agree, and most experts agree, that it is very hard to change people's minds if they are fully persuaded by misinformation. But maybe changing people's minds is not the only reason to be interested in them. It might be important to know them: Where are they coming from, and why do they think the way they do? What does their

experience of the world tell about? Is it possible to discuss this without normalising their views? Could you still take people seriously without taking lies seriously?

I wasn't actually very sold on the name of the summit. I don't know if "fighting" is always the best counter-strategy for misinformation. It sounds polarising. I liked what the journalist Michael Lund from Berlingske said in his presentation: keep drowning misinformation in facts. Telling facts thoroughly and vividly *is* countering misinformation. However, the appeal of misinformation to people isn't only about facts. People who are misinformed aren't necessarily uninformed. What they might be lacking is trust.

Processing information is more than just drinking up facts. Like the sociologist Jaron Harambam writes in his 2021 paper: "people are no isolated and rational blank sheets on which more information can be written, but they are emotional, social and cultural beings who have feelings, morals, ideologies and worldviews that greatly affect the way knowledge is interpreted and accepted". Harambam argues that endorsing science or other forms of knowledge can sometimes be "less of [a] cognitive and rational activity than an expression of identity, belonging and subcultural allegiances". In other words, misinformation needs to be understood in its social, cultural, and political context.

One simple theory explaining why people latch on to false narratives, about climate change or other things, is called motivated reasoning. People process and accept information selectively, influenced by their motivations and goals. Motivated reasoning can manifest as a tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information that supports pre-existing beliefs or desired outcomes, while downplaying or rejecting contradictory information. People may use that selective information as a tool of argumentation to defend their beliefs and reject outside pressure.

People engaging with misinformation may thus have a motivation and goal to reject more widely accepted information. But what drives that motivation? In the case of climate change, it's important to recognise that it's not just a scientific fact – it is a call to action. Climate change demands a fundamental societal and personal change. Additionally, there's a moral urgency that can feel like a judgment: people are positioned as either good or bad depending on their stance. For some, all this may create a sense of lost freedom and an imposed morality. They react with resistance and seek for a rationalisation of their stance: it's classic conspiracy theory territory.

Other motivations for misinformation beliefs could be financial or political. Perhaps your livelihood is threatened by the green transition. Perhaps the whole thing sounds like left-wing, globalist propaganda to you. Maybe the narrative of the threat does not correspond to

your worldview, or you have experiences that led you to not trust authorities. In any case, questioning both facts and morality may feel like a powerful footing. You can actually keep living and consuming just as you were, because the story they tell is not true.

Drowning false information in facts is basically the core job of journalists, but facts might not affect these motivations and the distrust towards the information. But is there any way that journalism can affect them? Are there alternative approaches to misinformation that would allow us to listen to the underlying reasoning and communicate different views while maintaining scientific facts? These are some questions I try to explore in this report, if only by scratching the surface.

The background of this report lies on the book I wrote during the Covid-19 pandemic and published in 2022. In Finnish, the book is called *Heränneet*, which means "The Awakened". In short, it was an effort to understand people who support conspiracy theories, and to analyse if it's possible for the people in the mainstream and the fringe to understand each other. In the course of writing it, I observed how the Finnish media covered the people who resisted and questioned the pandemic restrictions and vaccine policies or refused the Covid vaccine. In Finland, the former were called "corona critics". It's hard to put one label on this phenomenon, because there was a large range of opinions and affiliations in the so-called countermovement.

Some of the coverage, in my opinion, was problematic and counterproductive. For example, critical people were lumped together and labelled, and expressing doubts about how the pandemic was handled became stigmatised. At the time, I began to wonder whether the media coverage may have increased distrust by treating the subjects unfairly. It might have also contributed to polarisation by depicting the difference in views as black-and-white. Later in this report, I will review some examples about the coverage and mechanisms together with a couple of related studies. This is not an academic literature review, and it's far from comprehensive.

The pandemic was a very tricky environment for journalism. Are there really alternatives to covering non-compliant, potentially misinformed people during a health crisis? Or is that one of the situations that should be treated in black-and-white terms? It's difficult to give a definite answer, and there's a lot of controversy around this.

Initially, finding a constructive approach to covering misinformation was going to be a side note of this report, but over the course of the fellowship year, it became my main interest. Perhaps enough has been said about past mistakes. But if a movement like this

emerges again – sparked by a new pandemic (38 % chance in our lifetime, apparently), the escalation of the climate crisis, or a massive, polarising political shift – how should journalists deal with misinformation movements? Is there even a way to prevent them from growing?

I am also motivated to carry my experiences with the book further. Writing of it was a huge exercise, in which I tried to take everyone very seriously and listen them actively while keeping my head cool amidst false claims and groundless conspiracy narratives. I made mistakes in the process and probably also in the final text. But afterwards, if only for a fleeting moment, I felt like I had learned a way of listening that made me better equipped to face complex, charged disagreement. That's why I also want to explore whether this approach could have broader applications in journalism, and whether it offers potential for fostering positive change, rather than simply 'fighting' misinformation. It's a far reach to try to make journalism trustworthy for those who distrust it, but it's a worthwhile effort.

I think when people talk about the fight, the enemy they see are malicious actors using bots, deepfakes and politically tailored rumours to gain power and influence or spread confusion and chaos. This type of organised disinformation strategy has never been my main interest, but I understand the dangers and the radicalising potential. In this report, I focus on the grey area – where political disagreement becomes entangled with misinformation, and where ordinary people tap into misinformation narratives as a tool of argument. The people who challenge facts online may actually not aim for political gain or chaos, but they simply think they're arguing for truth and freedom. Sometimes, this is less about misinformation as a factual issue, and more about our culture of debate – how we draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable arguments, and how that boundary affects those who find themselves on the other side of it.

I will start by some basics of misinformation and related concepts, then make some connections between journalism and polarisation. In the latter part of the report, I will explore some approaches and theories that might be helpful in the coverage, moving towards more concrete journalistic applications. In the end, I will sum it up and try to offer some (cautious, tentative) advice for journalists covering citizen misinformation movements.

I

What if misinformation is not a virus but a symptom?

I have a definition problem. The question that I'm discussing in this report is: "How should journalists cover citizen misinformation movements in a way that decreases polarisation and enhances trust?" However, *citizen misinformation movements* is a term I made up – it's not a phenomenon that is recognised intuitively. Which citizens am I talking about, and what characterises them? What is the nature of the misinformation – or perhaps disinformation, or conspiracy theories?

I take comfort in the fact that everything in journalism is context-dependent. It is hard to give precise advise for any type of journalism. This is why I'm confidently using these loose terms, trying to keep several balls in the air and discuss meaningful ways of looking at them.

I chose the word "citizen" to signify, as discussed previously, that I'm interested in ordinary people who are engaging with misinformation for several, sometimes obscure motives. I speak of misinformation instead of disinformation, because disinformation is a morally charged word that speculates with nefarious intentions. And I focus on movements, because it implies that the volume of misinformation is newsworthy and has the power to mobilize people.

Since this is perhaps a little fluffy, why even single out misinformation as a topic? Two out of three experts I interviewed for this report don't work with misinformation specifically, but with political disagreement and polarisation. That's intentional. I'm interested in how journalists could discern the underlying motivations and value systems underneath misinformation: move beyond the first layer of false claims. This is a slightly different approach than debunking and fact-checking.

However, I wanted to focus on misinformation because that's how the phenomenon is conceptualised – and because the component of misinformation complicates political disagreements for journalists. The task may be to cover and describe the claims but simultaneously try to contain them, so the journalistic piece doesn't end up spreading and promoting misinformation. Furthermore, the word misinformation may add to an emotional response, which is interesting. Statements that are perceived false simply make people angry, as will be discussed later through the dissertation by Lea Pradella. Misinformation is not only

perceived infuriating but also dangerous, which may put journalists in "fight mode". That will inevitably affect the coverage.

Moving on, I will briefly define some concepts.

Misinformation is an umbrella term for all forms of false or misleading information regardless of the intent behind it (Altay et al., 2023). *Disinformation*, on the other hand, refers to false information created or spread deliberately to mislead, fuel cynicism, deepen political divides, weaken political actors, and sow confusion both nationally and internationally (Tuomola 2025). The same information can be classified as either misinformation or disinformation depending on the sender and their intentions. But as media scholar Salla Tuomola points out in her article on disinformation discourse (2025), it is often challenging in practice to determine the intent behind spreading false information. Who's to say? It's unlikely that the people starting false rumours would declare their real intentions. Often it's also hard to point out the origins of misinformation.

Naturally, tracing the origins and the real benefactors of disinformation is a crucial job for investigative journalists. However, I would argue that this aspiration has created some unfair treatment of ordinary people, who are blamed for strategically "sowing confusion" or acquiring political or financial gain by spreading wrong information – instead of them genuinely expressing their beliefs. In other words, ordinary people sharing misinformation may get the *disinformation* treatment in the media, which creates friction. I will return to more elaboration in the next chapter.

*Conspiracy theorie*s, then, are unproven, not widely accepted theories of conspiracies: large-scale plots or plans that are morally questionable and intentionally kept secret. Sometimes a person may have a conspiracist attitude, but it's hard to pinpoint the exact theory they are alluding to. In their 2019 book, Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead identify a worldview embodying "new conspiracism" that codifies conspiracy without a theory. Such a belief system seeks to delegitimise all authority. This points towards a common nominator that I see at the heart of conspiracy theories and similar misbeliefs: distrust. My term of "citizen misinformation movements" entails also an overarching distrust towards the providers of mainstream information, including journalism. They tend to question the commonly shared scientific or political information and present alternatives that are often perceived mis- or disinformation.

I have often heard some version of the claim that perhaps misinformation shouldn't really be covered at all in journalism, because the coverage leads to spreading falsehoods. There is certainly scientific backing to prove that the coverage may give legitimacy to falsehoods (e.g Bolet & Foos, 2023), or that the readers of debunking articles may actually remember the false claim better than the correction (Vehkoo 2019). However, the practical interpretations of these findings sometimes take on a mechanistic quality – the idea that simply presenting a false claim will cause it to "spread" like a virus.

While researching for this report, I came across an interesting conversation about this metaphor. It seems that the view of misinformation as a virus is discussed and contested in scientific literature. Interestingly, the biological understanding of misinformation became very vivid during the Covid pandemic, when a new disease called the "infodemic" gained prominence and broke through journalistic language. Felix Simon and Chico Carmago (2021) trace the term to World Health Organisation (WHO), whose Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced at a security conference at the wake of the pandemic: "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous."

I'll return to the claims in this quote soon. But I think it's very interesting if the pandemic and the logic of the disease rewired our minds and language to see patterns of an epidemic also in social and cognitive processes. Biology was a dominant paradigm at the time, so it also swept through the understanding of information-processing.

The term infodemic existed before the pandemic, but didn't really gain popularity. Running a MediaCloud search for all mentions of the term in international news media, Simon and Carmago found 61 stories referencing "infodemic" between 2010–2020. In 2020–2021, the same search resulted in 14 301 published stories. According to the writers, the term "infodemic" was often used to describe coronavirus-related mis- and disinformation, its spread and possible effects. Mostly, journalists were treating the existence of an infodemic as a "given, refraining from questioning the term's applicability or usefulness or any in-depth discussion of its merits", they write.

What's the problem, then? First of all, the virus metaphor underestimates the audiences and views people as passive recipients than can be "infected" simply through contamination. Sacha Altay et al. (2023) argue that this view is reminiscent of outdated models of communication and at odds with decades of data from communication studies.

Simon and Carnago note that the virus metaphor is misleading, since there is no single root cause behind the spread of misinformation, but people's behaviour, especially online, is

diverse and ambivalent. Furthermore, the biology metaphor carries an implication that if misinformation resembles a virus, it could be "kept under control with something akin to public health measures", they write. Using disease as a metaphor is often associated with metaphors of battle, fight, and war. Delightfully, they also cite Susan Sontag's classic essay "Illness as metaphor" (1978), which sheds light to the problematic image of cancer patients "fighting".

Most importantly, these metaphors may divert attention from the structural issues and contextual factors underlying misinformation, instead promoting superficial solutions like blocking and censorship. Furthermore, political leaders may exploit the situation: according to Simon and Carnago, various governments used the pandemic and the alleged flood of misinformation as an excuse to pass laws that claimed to address a crisis of mis- and disinformation but instead were often about curtailing fundamental human rights, such as the freedom of speech or press freedom.

Even if the virus metaphor reflected erratic thinking, you might ask: but isn't there a huge problem with misinformation spreading online?

I'd like to offer an alternative perspective from the researcher of psychology Sacha Altay and his colleagues. In their 2023 article, the authors showcase how the alarm over misinformation may be blown out of proportion. And the level of alarm is high: According to one study, Americans are more concerned about misinformation than sexism, racism, terrorism, or climate change. Respondents on World Risk Poll in 2020 said that they are more afraid of fake news than online fraud and online bullying. These fears are grounded in numerous articles and journals that identify misinformation as a major cause of many sociopolitical issues – but in doing so, the authors note, they neglect underlying factors such as declining trust in institutions.

To Altay et al., the worry about misinformation has characteristics of a moral panic. They put some blame in the journalistic media and call for a more complex analysis of issues rather than just accusing social media for spreading disinformation like a virus. Most crucially, Altay et al. state that the moral panic is result of overgeneralisation of scientific research and poor consideration of methodological limits.

In the article, they debunk six common myths about misinformation. I find them very interesting for journalists to consider, so I'm going to summarise the six points made by the article, although its findings have also been contested. (For a critical response to some of the points, see Ecker et al. "Why Misinformation Must Not Be Ignored", 2024.)

1. Misinformation is not a social media problem. As is quite obvious, misinformation and conspiracy theories have been around since the dawn of time. The authors remark that the spread of misinformation on social media has been methodologically convenient to study, but one should remember that active social media users are not representative of the general population. Nor are the topics that misinformation usually is about: as many as 70 percent of U.S. social media users say that they rarely, or never, post about social or political issues.

2. The internet might not be as rife with misinformation as we think. The numbers sound huge: During the 2016 US presidential campaign, the top 20 fake news stories on Facebook accumulated nearly 9 million shares, reactions, and comments between August 1 and November 8. However, if all of the 1,5 billion Facebook users had interacted with just one piece of content per week, these engagements with the top fake news stories would represent only 0.042% of all their actions during the study period. All in all, the authors emphasise, people don't spend very much time on news per day, and even less time on misinformation. According to Cordonier & Brest (2021), misinformation represents 0,15% of the American media diet and 0,16% of the French. For the most part, people use the internet for connecting with friends, shopping, an entertainment.

However, I can see a loophole in these classifications: surely, some of the social connection and entertainment, even visiting legacy news sites, can bring people to misinformation. There are lots of entertaining memes and videos based on false information. In other words, the results depend on how misinformation use classified and calculated. This is exactly what Ecker et al. criticise in the aforementioned response. They also argue that even if a tiny fraction of people interacted with misinformation online, that fraction can be more influential than its size, both by channeling the narratives into political arena or by being louder than the silent majority. However, in a perspective-shifting sense, the number-crushing by Altay et al. is interesting.

3. False news does not spread faster than true news. Contrary to the precise warnings about the infodemic by WHO's Ghebreyesus, the evidence of the speed of fake news is unclear. Altay et al. find problems with several well-known studies which have created alarmist headlines about the speed of misinformation. The core of the issue is that the classification of "fake news" in these studies is unclear. In one survey, they had included hyper-partisan outlets, such as Fox News, in the fake news category. If those were removed, traditional news would outperform falsehoods by a large margin.

The next three myths concern the reception and impact of misinformation. The authors criticise the common methods of misinformation studies. They write: "Until now, studies on misinformation have been dominated by experimental approaches, self-report surveys, and big data methods reducing the reception of misinformation to mere stimulus and response mechanisms, while failing to capture audience agency and context." This is very interesting to me, since I've long wondered why poll numbers of conspiracy theory support are so high across countries. My conclusion is that the self-report surveys might not reflect the number of people who take the theories into heart. Similarly, maybe the mere sharing of misinformation online doesn't always signal commitment to misbeliefs but something akin to "just throwing it out there". Along these lines, the next claim is:

4. People don't believe everything they see on the internet. People don't necessarily even believe the links they share. Even when people tend to share things more if they consider them accurate, there is a disconnect between sharing intentions and accuracy judgments. "Sharing and liking are not believing. People interact with misinformation for a variety of reasons: to socialize, to express skepticism, outrage or anger, to signal group membership, or simply to have a good laugh", the article continues. The authors claim that when browsing online, people are more skeptical than gullible. Furthermore, while trust in the media is low [in many countries], trust in information encountered on social media is even lower.

5. Surveys overestimate the prevalence of misbeliefs. Now, we get to those polls and surveys that I tend to distrust. The authors cite a study by Luskin et al., which analysed the design of as many as 180 media surveys with closed-ended questions measuring belief in misinformation. They found that more than 90 percent of these surveys lacked an explicit "Don't know" or "Not sure" option and used formulations encouraging guessing such as "As far as you know . . .," or "Would you say that . . ." This may lead to participants trying to guess the correct answer and report holding beliefs that they did not hold before the survey. When Luskin and colleagues added a "don't know" category in a survey, the percentage of people who confidently held a misperception went down from 25 to 5 percent.

As a side note, in his 2023 book on political rumours, the MIT professor Adam J. Berinsky expresses a worry for the undecided population, as well. He classifies the people who are unsure about political rumours into three groups: the disengaged, who don't pay much mind to any political content; the skeptical, who want to leave an open door to some suspicious activity (my husband often falls in this category); and the truly unsure, who simply don't know if a rumour is true or not. Importantly, Berinsky argues, even the uncertainty

around baseless rumours can pose a threat to trust in institutions and decision-makers. His argument is that scholars (and perhaps also journalists) should target corrective efforts also to this group of uncertain people.

In the conclusion chapter, Altay et al. voice a similar opinion: "Instead of focusing on the small number of people who consume news from unreliable sources, it would be more fruitful to focus on the large share of people who are overly skeptical of reliable sources and rarely consume any news", they write.

Altay et al. also see another problem in the surveys in this field: they tend to measure misperceptions that are politically controversial and polarising (think Barack Obama's place of birth). This may lead respondents to use their answers to signal group membership or a similar political attitude rather than a factual judgment. In other words, the answers might not measure a true factual misconception. People may even intentionally provide misinformation to reaffirm their partisan identity. This seems to ring true with Donald Trump's most loyal audience: they might not believe in every falsehood, but they don't care about them, and the not-caring is exactly the flag they are waving. It signals a signing-out of a shared morality, as well.

Final point of the article:

6. Misinformation does not have a strong impact on people's behaviour. Altay et al. acknowledge that of course sometimes people believe what they see on the internet, but does it change their lives? First of all, the authors note, people largely consume politically congenial misinformation – things that they already agree with, or are predisposed to accept. Misbeliefs such as conspiracy theories "are likely to be post hoc rationalisations of pre-existing attitudes, such as distrust of institutions", they write. And even people do change their minds, attitudes are only weakly connected to behaviour. This problem is known as the value-action gap. An example that comes to my mind is that people may feel bad for farm animals in industrial food production, but they keep buying and eating cheap meat nevertheless.

This doesn't mean that misinformation wouldn't have a dangerous mobilising potential. Election conspiracy theories certainly played a role in the 2021 Capitol attack in the US. It is very difficult to argue away this observation, albeit it happened in a specific context of strong polarisation with a powerful political figure fuelling distrust and discontent. Altay et al. don't discuss this example, and it's another topic of research. I think the point the authors are making here is more academic, targeting the conclusions about behavioural patterns. To the very least, it's always difficult to prove causality, so one should be cautious

of stating that misinformation is leading people astray. Belief in conspiracy theories is associated with refusing the Covid-19 vaccination – but are conspiracy theories causing the vaccine hesitancy? Altay et al. remark that it might just be that both of those things are caused by other factors, such as a low trust in institutions. I might add that there could be a reverse causality: a person may decide not to get vaccinated for one reason or another, and to rationalise their choice, they reach out for a conspiracy narrative to explain their distrust.

To sum up, Altay et al. conclude:

> *The idea that exposure to misinformation (or information) has a strong and direct influence on people's attitudes and behaviors comes from a misleading analogy of social influence according to which ideas infect human minds like viruses infect human bodies. Americans did not vote for Trump in 2016 because they were brainwashed. There is no such thing as "brainwashing" (Mercier, 2020). Information is not passed from brain to brain like a virus is passed from body to body. When humans communicate, they constantly reinterpret the messages they receive, and modify the ones they send.*

Persuading someone to change their mind is difficult, for real news and fake news alike.

Would the conclusion then be that misinformation is not a problem and not a topic to write about in the first place? Obviously not. I'm simply arguing – supported by these scholars – that misinformation should be understood in a nuanced way: not just as a dangerous virus, but as a tool for expressing political attitudes, values, disagreements, and lived experiences. Jungherr & Schroeder (2021) even produce another disease metaphor:

> *Disinformation is thus not a driver of social or political divisions. Instead, it is an expression of them (Kreiss et al., 2020). Addressing disinformation primarily from an information quality perspective thus resembles the doctor only treating a patient's symptoms while missing the cause of the disease.*

Naturally, the symptoms do play a role, and fact-checking and debunking should still be part of journalism. It's another field, and not the topic of this report. What I know through some studies is that there are mixed results for the effects of fact-checking, for various reasons. What Altay et al. suggest is that fact-checking may have little effect, when the problem isn't really about facts in the first place:

> *Given people's skepticism toward information encountered online and the low prevalence of misinformation in their media diet, interventions aimed at reducing the acceptance of misinformation are bound to have smaller effects than interventions increasing trust in reliable sources of information*

> *(Acerbi et al., 2022). More broadly, enhancing trust in reliable sources should be a priority over fostering distrust in unreliable sources (Altay, 2022).*

All of the critical scholars quoted here call for a deeper look into structural factors which produce misinformation or erode trust in institutions. This seems like an intriguing challenge, but one I definitely won't have resources for in the scope on this report. My focus is on journalism: if we were to accept that there is no infodemic, or at least that the very existence of misinformation is not the main target to fight, how could we rethink or reframe this phenomenon? Could that have potential for enhancing trust in reliable sources of information, as advocated by Altay et al.?

To bring this to a slightly more concrete level, I'd like to share the quote that really helped me in understanding conspiracy theories. It's from the sociologist Jaron Harambam, said in an interview in 2021:

> *Journalists focus on facts and say that they are wrong, so we don't need to listen to these people. But I think the truth is just a surface of a deeper-lying moral framework that is under attack or in conflict with what is going on. You need to go deeper and find out what's behind it. Then you can find other ways of dealing with these people.*

In this report, I mostly view misinformation as something that ordinary people use as a tool of argument or a reflection of a worldview. This is a limited angle that partially excludes purposeful political gain through false rumours. In the following chapters, I will present the viewpoints of my three interviewees. The aim is to explore alternative approaches to 'fighting misinformation' – ones that draw on framing, interpersonal dynamics, and the nature of the public sphere.

II

Waiting for the media to apologize: how talking about disinformation may polarise

Who are the people who share or engage with misinformation? This is a very difficult group of people to identify or define, because few people would say that they share misinformation. It's a definition that's given from outside, and not one that's carried proudly.

There is an interesting new qualitative study from Finland about exactly the kind of people I'm thinking of: citizens with some fringe opinions who have been blamed for sharing misinformation. The media scholar Salla Tuomola has interviewed 25 people who feel that their views, especially on controversial and polarised topics, are labeled as wrong and erroneous. They have experienced silencing and exclusion from public debate, which has been justified by claims of disinformation. According to Tuomola's study, they describe themselves as active citizens who are concerned about the weakening of democracy because they see public conversation becoming one-sided, especially on sensitive topics. Tuomola calls them "alternative epistemic authorities" – perhaps another example of how difficult definitions are. In layman terms, they could maybe be called social media news influencers outside of the mainstream. (Tuomola 2025.)

Tuomola's article opens several interesting pathways. First of all, it gives a partial answer to my question about how media coverage of the so-called corona critics impacted the people at the center of it – and whether the coverage ended up fuelling more polarisation and distrust. Secondly, it examines how the concept of disinformation is used in public conversation to draw boundaries and delegitimise certain viewpoints. And thirdly, it sheds some light on what the people who are distrustful of the mainstream media want from the media.

I set up an interview with Tuomola, who is now a visiting postdoctoral researcher at Roskilde University. To start off, I ask her how she picked the people for the study and how she identified their alternativeness.

"My criteria to ask people for an interview was that they had somehow lost their trust in mainstream media, meaning the big, traditional outlets", she says. "They also had a critical relationship with it, and they offered alternative viewpoints to the content that they found in mainstream media."

She adds that they often used alternative platforms, such as fringe media and Telegram groups, sometimes because they had been banned from mainstream social platforms. All of the interviewees had a significant and loyal following: they were trusted as information sources and their posts were reshared by others. The topics that they posted about included things like health and nutrition, climate and the environment, security politics, and conservative views.

There was a wide range of age and education levels, and all of the people in working age had a job. Several of them consumed a lot of information and even read original scientific articles, sometimes as soon as they were published, which was astonishing to Tuomola. "They said they are doing the work that journalists should do", she tells me. "One had read the whole IPCC report and could point out how journalists had only picked out the summaries and the most sensational exaggerations. I was quite dumb-struck, considering my prejudices."

Contrary to what one might think, nearly all of them read the mainstream media. Their ways of using it varied: some just wanted all of the information available, some saw mainstream and alternative media as opposing sides and wanted to hear what both were saying. Others read mainstream media like the devil reads the Bible: to "see what lies they have come up with this time", Tuomola describes. "It was a critical relationship, but they were really interested in the media", she concludes. There was also a small number of people who just selected their sources to support their own worldview, but Tuomola sees them as the marginal minority. "There was a wide range of people in this group", Tuomola says. "They have been categorised as one distrusting mass, but I tried to describe the nuances there. It's very difficult, and it's especially difficult to hold presentations about them, because the audience has immediate perceptions that yeah, it's these kind of people."

There are several things in the study that challenge prejudices – what strikes me maybe the most is the analytical self-reflection in some of the interview quotes. One interviewee acknowledges that people like them are vulnerable to informational manipulation, because they are disappointed in the system in one way or another. In this person's view, someone with malicious intentions may take advantage of this disappointment and then become the megaphone of the group, supposedly representing their views. That

distorts the image on the outside, so that everyone considers them to be lunatics or "Russian trolls". Another interviewee admits becoming sometimes too fanatical and uncritical about information that supports their views. I think these kind of reflections speak against the image of misinformation as a virus or people disappearing into the rabbit hole with no self-control.

Tuomola tells me that a lot of the interviewees were also concerned about how difficult it is to estimate the credibility of information these days. "Several of them admitted that they have been mistaken and had shared something that turned out untrue. They were really stressed that something like this could happen and expressed the need for tools to navigate this kind of environment."

In other words, these alternative opinion-makers seemed truly motivated about finding quality information, not about "sowing doubt" or eroding democracy, like is the accusation with disinformation. "What also surprised me was that although it's often said that they are a threat to democracy in some way, majority of them said that reliable journalism is needed and it should remain at its place. And as for democracy, they were worried about it. Their idea of democracy was just different: they thought this current model is not enough but people must have a chance for direct influence", Tuomola says and explains that this kind of view is called radical democracy, echoing the original idea of the "rule of the people". "Democracy doesn't mean the same to everyone."

In contrast, anti-democratic or extreme-right views were entirely absent from the group – a finding that surprised Tuomola. Having done her PhD on radical right media in Finland, she had expected to encounter such views among the alternative influencers. After all, during the corona pandemic, there had been significant media attention on the radical right's role in shaping the anti-government countermovement. At that time, when opinions questioning the pandemic restrictions and vaccine policies began to surface, the movement was seen as a breeding ground for the far-right.

"This observation was one of the motivations of my article. The interviewees were amused about how they had been called neo-Nazis or far right activists, but when I listened to them, I discovered that those labels were not true at all", Tuomola says. She thinks that this mislabeling reflects something about the media. "My impression was that there was inability to deal with them, which is why it was easier to label them as being outright dangerous to democracy. That got me interested in how the concept of disinformation is used as a weapon in discursive battles: how those who disagree are labeled as dangerous spreaders of disinformation."

Indeed, the corona pandemic marked a turning point for many of these distrustful alternative influencers. According to Tuomola, they thought the media was fuelling fear and directing the public opinion to be against the people who refused the covid vaccine. Many of them recounted that they know people who still feel like second-class citizens because of how they were represented in the media. (Tuomola 2024.) Additionally, some of them who had been previously writing articles and opinion pieces for the mainstream media could not get their texts published anymore after the pandemic started.

While these are subjective experiences, they sound very plausible to me. I observed the coverage closely during the pandemic, especially in 2021, when the covid vaccines became available and there was increasing pressure to get vaccinated. In my opinion, there were some potentially polarising elements in the coverage of people who were opposing the vaccination policies or simply not getting vaccinated.

First of all, the role of conspiracy theories was exaggerated in the coverage. There were many articles explaining conspiracy theories and their dangers, and associating them with people who were demonstrating against the government's policies or refusing the vaccine. However, based on research and expert interviews, conspiracy theories were not wide-spread in Finland, and they were not the main reason for doubting the covid vaccine. Vaccine scepticism in general in Finland is not wide-spread either, nor is it growing in particular. On the contrary, trust in science is increasing. (Mattila 2022.) Furthermore, it is very normal, perhaps somewhat even desirable, that at times of a major health crisis and major limitations of personal freedoms, some backlash will appear and a limited part of population will react with distrust and rebellion. Considering all this, conspiracy theories got disproportionate coverage. Naturally, there is never an objectively right proportion for something in the news: "importance" as a news criterion is always biased. However, I would argue that the coverage of conspiracy theories in the media was an example of how data-driven media is skewed towards more extreme and negative exemplars of phenomena. The juicy, weird, and threatening stories grab the audience's attention, and conspiracy theories are simply interesting to readers. This tendency may provide a false picture of what is going on, which may then impact policy attitudes at large. The Aarhus University professor Lene Aarøe et al. (2024) analyse the media's tendency for extreme exemplars and its implications:

> *[W]hen journalists supply extreme negative exemplars that deviate substantially from the larger population they represent, it results in a biased representation of reality. Therefore, exemplars can generate distorted generalizations and significantly impact people's policy attitudes.*

In the case of the covid vaccine, the fear of conspiracy theories might result in demands for tougher control and pressure on the minority. People in the mainstream could insist on vaccine mandates, for example, but usually mandatory requirements create a backlash and more distrust. This is one mechanism how exaggerated coverage can breed affective polarisation and distrust: by riling up the majority and hardening the tone of public conversation.

Second of all, I saw issues with the framing and tone in the coverage. In many of the articles about the countermovement, there was a strong moral framing and an emphasis on the far-right connections, Russian or otherwise foreign influence and financial or political gain. In columns and op-eds, there was sometimes name-calling, irony, ridiculing and straw-manning – projecting more extreme opinions onto people. As an example, here's a translated quote from an op-ed on the regional paper Aamulehti:

> *Anti-vaccination is about falling for conspiracy theories. It ressembles getting involved in cults. In both cases, basic scientific facts become meaningless to people and they replace them with false information, disinformation. Suddenly, the Earth is no longer round, but flat. This is also what anti-vaccination is about. […] The most important thing is to reserve and get the corona vaccinations according to the instructions of your home municipality. (AL 24.7.2021)*

Considering the consequences, it's possible that this type of writing may have reinforced distrust among the people that it was about. Tuomola's article seems to imply that is what happened.

My analysis of the coverage was of course not systematic but instead somewhat biased by my perspective. Fortunately, there has been at least one scientific review about the coverage in Finland: in 2023, the Tampere University media researcher Maarit Mäkinen published an article analysing the media coverage of alternative viewpoints during the pandemic. She analysed dozens of articles, op-eds and columns together with one documentary, with keywords like "corona", "activist", "critic", "alternatives", and "conspiracy". Her focus was on the framing and presentation of alternative views and the use of potentially polarising rhetoric. She identified three prevalent frames: One was the *danger*, emphasising conspiracy theories and radical views and contrasting them with the threats of the disease. The second one was *moralisation*, pointing towards the irresponsibility of protesters or the unvaccinated, and the bad intentions of the spreaders of wrong information. The third framing was *invalidation*, which manifested as portraying people as irrational, silly and anti-scientific. People's criticism and reasons to disagree or refuse the vaccine were not

discussed and reflected on, but they were quickly invalidated and corrected by factual argumentation.

Maarit Mäkinen concludes that this media environment was likely to discourage and stigmatise disagreement. The polarising elements she identified included the lack of dialogue, labelling people, and the use of extreme expressions and negative stereotypes. She argues that things were presented morally black and white, which may have narrowed the space for public discussion and made people censor themselves for the fear of moral stigma.

While I agree with most of her findings, there could be a critical view of the article as well. Mäkinen sees the covered phenomenon as purely disagreement, alternative views and citizen activism – but one cannot deny that there was also mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories circling around. The citizens who were engaged in this community were also using some extreme rhetoric – talking about crimes against humanity and the war between good and evil – and in some cases, even spreading hate speech against government officials or public speakers. In other words, they weren't just victims of unfair coverage.

One counter-argument could be that people's behaviour may become more aggressive and extreme precisely if their initial questions and concerns are not heard. This tendency may be exacerbated if they are stigmatised and excluded from public discourse. In her article, Salla Tuomola refers to studies on "public silencing", demonstrating that stigmatising practices may make people seek for marginal platforms and closed communities where their views are not restricted.

Besides, political elites and liberals should recognise their responsibility in setting the tone of conversation, write social scientists Armi Mustosmäki and Asko Huisman in another recent article (2025). They analyse the coverage of the anti-government Convoy demonstrations in early 2022, also demonstrating how journalistic media participated in invalidating, ridiculing practices. They argue that there's a wider phenomenon called "post-respect era" where affective rhetoric is used by all parties. According to Mustosmäki and Huisman, affective and stigmatising tone in anti-populist arguments can act as a tool for populists to further their agenda and strengthen their position.

The Convoy demonstration was, in a way, the final big protest of pandemic years. There seemed to be increasing polarisation at the time, particularly around the question of vaccines. However, it would be unwise to exaggerate the polarisation as well, since this was a limited time and a limited phenomenon. Research shows that descriptive claims of polarisation may also create polarisation (Peters 2021) – another reminder for journalists in

moderately polarised, peaceful countries! However, Tuomola's article has some wider implications, which are still interesting to discuss.

When considering the image that she had about alternative epistemic authorities, Salla Tuomola paid attention to the labels that she had encountered. As mentioned, she didn't recognise the far-right attitudes that were supposedly so prevalent among this group of people. Additionally, she started to wonder about the conversation surrounding disinformation. The people she interviewed kept mentioning the fact that they had been blamed for spreading disinformation, which they felt bad about. The concept of disinformation was interesting, because it didn't just refer to spreading false information – it also seemed to delegitimise speakers by framing them as insincere or exposing their supposed hidden agendas. Tuomola discovered studies about the "discursive" use of the word disinformation, which means that the word is used as a rhetorical weapon.

Tuomola observes that the word 'disinformation' can be used by all parties in discursive battle – for example, populists may be employing it in their own use to target political opponents or journalists. "If someone disagrees with you, you can just blame them for spreading disinformation", she explains. Thus, what has already happened to the term "fake news" is now happening to disinformation: through political rhetoric, it's been rendered almost meaningless.

Referring to a study by Emily Van Duyn and Jessica Collier (2019), Tuomola also argues that the constant "worry talk" about disinformation has a risk of doing exactly what it's supposed to prevent. When journalists, politicians and government officials repeatedly express their worry about the uncertainty of information, it may lower the trust in media and the citizens' ability to identify correct information. She also quotes Michael Hameleers (2024), who has argued that both disinformation and the disinformation discourse can produce and reinforce epistemic confusion and distrust.

Perhaps most importantly, the discursive use of disinformation makes information political, which means that political disagreement is framed into a battle of right and wrong information. In other words, competing opinions and worldviews are seen through the lens of factual correctness and potentially also deemed immoral.

Certainly, the people interviewed by Tuomola felt that they had been excluded from public conversation. They felt that their arguments and opinions weren't listened to on the basis of being blamed for disinformation. One of them argued that in the disinformation discourse, there's no room to question mainstream views, because the very act of questioning

is judged through a moral lens. Just like Maarit Mäkinen in her article, the interviewees suggested that this practice can also weaken the democratic experience of participation and inclusion and lead to self-censorship.

But what to do? Should we stop talking about disinformation altogether because of these effects?

One obvious point of doubt is raised by Tuomola herself in the article. It could be argued that it's beneficial for people to position themselves as victims of censorship and silencing. After all, it's an age-old populist strategy. The second polarising mechanism I mentioned above – the mainstream pushing people into margins – has been questioned, as well. For example, far-right activists in Germany have sometimes claimed that if sympathising with the Nazis wasn't such a huge taboo, they wouldn't have had to become extremists to get their voices heard. In the course I took on political extremism at Aarhus University, the lecturer Tim Lars Allinger cast doubt on this narrative. It aims to rationalise extremist behavior, even call for sympathy for the extremists. Yet, the freedom of speech in Western countries is generally vast, and those who claim they have been silenced still seem to be able to voice their opinion just fine.

In her article, Salla Tuomola reflects on somewhat similar thoughts. Perhaps positioning oneself as a victim is another tool in the discursive battle. Perhaps it echoes the populist divide between the margins ant the suppressive elite, the good and the bad.

In the interview, I express my confusion on what to take from this. She describes the experience of those targeted by the disinformation discourse, but is it just an experience, nothing more? If accounts of mistreatment from the media are just a rhetorical twist, is there any normative lesson for journalists? Additionally, I recount my own experience from talking with people who disagreed with the covid policies and questioned vaccines. Many of their observations about society were insightful and interesting, but when I saw their sources for facts, I was often disappointed by the poor quality of the information. Some of it may have been some sort of scientific literature, but some of it was just nonsense. How and why should that be brought into the conversation in mainstream media?

Tuomola acknowledges that the remarks about the victim talk may complicate her message, but this is a complicated field. "It's also an uncomfortable thought for me – to suggest that it's precisely these people who aren't getting the attention they want in public and have therefore started producing their own content or turned to other sources – that it's a morally pure experience of being treated badly. They also have various motivations and background factors", she says. "They aren't just poor souls but active people with agency

who are responding to that speech, and partly reproducing it and making use of their own experience."

She also agrees with me that there's a lot of misinformation that needs to be called out. However, there are still things that the media could do differently. "It would be good to pay attention to these labels that portray them very dangerous and extreme. It maintains an impression that lots of people deliberately spread wrong information just to create confusion and distrust, and I don't think that's what this is about. What's closer to the truth is that we have lots of ideologies and values here."

She brings up a book by Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou called *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*. The authors assess critically the terms of post-truth and fake news, those buzz words that preceded disinformation. "We talk of 'post-truth era' as if democracy was based on purely rational thinking and it was possible to distinguish the truth from non-truth – but we forget that that democracy looks like the people in it, and there are lots of opinions and truths here", Tuomola says. "There is also an assumption that things would have been very much in order before and now, for the first time in history, we are victims of informational influence."

She gives a laugh recounting one of her main lessons of the study. "I had to admit to myself, that there are different kinds of people who think differently, but that doesn't always mean that they are wrong."

And what would the distrustful people want from the media, if anything? I ask Tuomola whether their calls for greater freedom of speech and concern for democracy simply mean they want more space to express their own opinions. She doesn't think so. "They just want more argumentation on different views in general, so that the audience could follow the conversation. They wish mainstream media wouldn't offer such ready-made answers but that there would be space for people to consider what they want to believe."

According to Tuomola, many people she interviewed thought that liberal and progressive opinions were taking too much space from conservative views. Still, they didn't really think that mainstream media was deliberately lying. "Fact-checking is not what they wish for. It was just that they feel some views and political arguments are missing in the media, and that's why they don't want to read it anymore."

Tuomola reckons that in some instances, there's too much concern and fear in the Finnish media that if readers are provided too many alternatives or opinions on controversial topics, such as health and nutrition, it will lead to a slippery slope and people will spiral out

of control. Similarly, Tuomola thinks that the media could loosen its grip on power a little bit and acknowledge that it cannot serve and please all audiences. There will always be people who don't trust the media, and even those who do, read it critically and selectively. Trust has never been static and stable, and that might be okay. Audiences have a good understanding that a news journalist cannot be an expert on everything, and the media could show more openness in admitting mistakes and responding to criticism.

Several of her interviewees were disappointed that there had been no public debrief about the possible missteps in the coverage of distrustful people during the pandemic. "Some of them even wished that the media would have apologised to them for calling them anti-scientific or granny killers", she says.

This issue has been raised even on governmental level in Finland: that there was never any comprehensive debrief about the public conversation in the pandemic. What to do next time, and what kind of approaches would be helpful in such situations? That's what I will try to delve into in the next two chapters.

III

If it's not about the facts: is there space for empathy in the media?

In February this year, the podcast *This American Life* aired a very moving episode called *Ten Things I don't Want to Hate about You*. In the story, the journalist Zach Mack tries to mend his relationship with his dad, a conservative Christian who has gone deep into conspiracy theories and pseudo-spiritual political prophesies. Zach's dad's beliefs and behavior, such as obsessive prepping for a prophesied catastrophe, are starting to tear the family apart. Suddenly, the dad suggests a kind of solution: he proposes a bet to Zach. He writes down ten prophesies that he believes will come true in the year 2024. It seems like a very improbable list: various Democratic leaders would be charged for treason and the country would deploy martial law, to name a few examples. Zach's dad, however, is willing to bet 10 000 dollars against his son that all of it will come true by the end of the year. If he loses, he will also have to admit that he's wrong. If he's right, his son, the journalist, will have to admit defeat.

For both Zach and his dad, the bet is about more than just the money. Zach hopes that when found wrong, his dad's eyes will open and he will let go of his most extreme beliefs. And the dad? He tells Zach: "I think that once you see that I haven't been duped by AI and social media and the algorithms, you will gain a lot more respect for who I am and how I think, and how I've come to believe."

To me, the comment seems like a key moment. Does he feel that his son doesn't respect him? Is that what it's all about?

While waiting for 2024 to go by, Zach engages in long conversations with his dad. He remembered his dad once saying that he didn't truly know him. Now, under the pretence of the bet, he takes the time to listen to his life story. It's beautifully done: even though the list of conspiracies looms large between them, Zach doesn't try to debate him out of it. Neither does he try to diagnose his dad's "condition" or search for some ultimate explanation to make sense of it. He simply wants to get to know him.

They enjoy the conversations: Zach's dad says that for this experience alone, he would have paid good money. He feels understood, and Zach feels closer to his dad than

ever. That's the real value they gain after the year – because, not surprisingly, debunking the list doesn't resolve the disagreement.

This was a long introduction to the chapter in which I explore how insights from interpersonal communication can inform our approach to covering misinformation. I have my own experience with my mother-in-law, who was the principal character in my book. During the second year of the pandemic in 2021, I had long Zoom calls with her to understand why she supported certain conspiracy theories and denied the benefits of vaccines, and to illustrate the dynamics between us. Eventually, I started to half-consciously follow a method of listening where I tuned out the distracting fact statements and provocations, and instead focused on the deeper story behind them. To myself, I called this an exercise of empathy and boundaries, but I never went very deep into what *empathy* actually is. Now I also find myself wondering what role empathy might play in journalism more broadly. If it was used in journalism about citizen misinformation movements, what effect could it have?

When I was taking the course on polarisation at Aarhus University, I was introduced to a doctoral dissertation that is related to these questions. Lea Pradella, who is originally from Germany but now a post-doc researcher at Aarhus University, has written her PhD about the effects of empathy in political disagreement. She argues that growing political divisions and rising animosity in public debate are leaving people increasingly frustrated – and taking attention away from addressing critical issues. At the same time, disagreement is inherently necessary for society to function. This is why Pradella seeks to find out if empathy could help foster non-hostile disagreement.

Although Pradella doesn't specifically study misinformation, the approach appears promising for that application. When engaging with someone who holds misbeliefs, disagreement is likely to persist, and feelings of mutual frustration may turn into hostility. When this tension plays out on a public level, it can provoke polarisation, as argued in the previous chapter – people withdrawing from shared spaces and seeking support from those who think like them.

To counter this trend, journalism that covers misinformation should aim for a careful balance: on one hand, it must challenge and correct false claims and expose hidden political agendas; on the other, it should foster a respectful public space that encourages understanding of diverse perspectives.

Through Pradella's dissertation and interview, I try to examine how empathy could serve in achieving these goals.

At first glance, empathy might not seem relevant to "serious" journalism. Empathy sounds like abandoning critical judgment and indulging in somebody's sob story. However, Pradella explains that there is a distinction between different types of empathy. *Affective empathy* can mean either emotional mirroring – actually feeling what someone else feels – or compassion, which is an emotional response to another person's feelings, like feeling sorry for their sadness. In contrast, *cognitive empathy* alludes to a knowledge-based understanding of another person. Engaging in it, one tries to listen to another person attentively and empathetically in order to achieve accurate understanding on how they think and feel. This approach, in my opinion, is usable in a journalism.

In the interview, I share with Pradella my experience from discussions with my mother-in-law: As soon as we started the conversation, we fell into a frustrating debate about facts. She was emailing me links, I was fact-checking and mansplaining them, which she would then ignore. It felt like we were both trying to get on top: I would say maybe that as a journalist, I am trained in verifying information. She would imply that if I had lived as long as she has and experienced the history of the United States, I would understand how power really works. Between the lines, perhaps, I hinted that she was uneducated, and she hinted that I was young and naïve. The turning point came when I decided to let go of the facts and focus on her story, those experiences of power that she has. The conversation eased and we started to find some mutual understanding.

Lea Pradella recognises that talking about facts brings an element of competition in the conversation. "Facts are really important, but there's a risk of hierarchy between what is factually accurate or inaccurate: I'm right, my opinion is right, and yours is wrong", she says.

Factual debates also tend to incite hostility. In her dissertation, Pradella also refers to studies about this. Knowledge and facts are regarded highly in our culture, also in a moral way: factually accurate conclusions are viewed as virtuous, while faulty and irrational conclusions are vicious. This tension plays out in social media, where people often start to "discredit those hold irrational views or contradict established facts in order to demonstrate the superiority of fact-based beliefs". In other words, people get angry when they think someone is wrong. One study found that a third of Danes who were hostile on social media blamed their behavior on defending factual accuracy (Rasmussen 2023). Another found that 62 percent of Danish tweets rejecting misinformation included mockery of those who believed it (Johansen et al. 2022)

To reduce hostility, it might be helpful to move beyond the factual argument. “While there is a true and false when it comes to facts, there is still a subjective dimension in whether people believe that or not”, Pradella remarks.

Engaging in empathy, then, can bring forth that subjective dimension and the factors that create subjective differences. Oftentimes, that dimension is what is really driving the conflict: particular facts might not be that important. As an example, Pradella names a disagreement about how many people there may have been at Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2016. There is an objectively correct number, but that might not be why the debate gets heated.

“It’s not about the facts, it’s more about what’s conveyed with the facts. What is behind them, that’s what would be interesting to talk about, rather than ‘you’re wrong because you think this’. There are reasons why this person thinks this way. I think understanding them before having a conversation about the facts is much more important”, Pradella says. “Often we think that what we’re talking about is what the conversation is about, but it’s not.”

She speculates that underneath the argument between my and my mother-in-law, we were actually sad and concerned for one another. “Often there are emotions attached, but they don’t get said out loud or they get buried behind the facts.”

I confess that maybe what was at stake for me was my fear of conflict. I was maybe half-way through the project when I realised that I just really wanted her to change her mind. I just wanted us to agree. But that wasn’t possible.

There are two experiments in Lea Pradella’s dissertation that are particularly interesting to me. The articles are still under a peer-review, and I refer to one of the working papers and her dissertation as a whole.

In the first experiment, Pradella compares different ways of approaching political disagreement and how they affect someone who is faced with a political opponent. Participants, all U.S. residents, first received instructions on what was expected of them, after which they were exposed to an opposing opinion on immigration. One group was told to engage in empathetic understanding, the others were either focusing on defending their own opinion or tackling the disagreement with the aim of factual accuracy. Afterwards, Pradella measured the effects on hostility, feeling of superiority, and agreement.

Most importantly, those who had been told to approach the opponent empathetically were significantly less hostile than anyone else. They also felt less superior to the person whose opinion they had read.

However, contrary to expectations, the empathy condition also increased the chance of agreement. Those who empathised with their opponents agreed with them afterwards more than any other group. Still, Pradella writes, even if empathy increased agreement, most participants still were able to disagree and maintain their own opinion. "Hence, empathy seems to open the door to agreement while not closing it to non-hostile disagreement, underscoring empathy's potential to make disagreements less adversarial and more constructive", she writes.

Empathy may also have effects on people who witness is from the outside. That's what Pradella's second experiment is about. Participants were shown a series of short scenarios based on social media interactions. In them, someone from the opposing political side responded to an opinion expressed by someone from the participant's own political group. The political opponent was displaying varying degrees of empathy and disagreement. It created a variety of scenarios: people observed either someone who purely empathises, empathises and disagrees, purely disagrees, purely shows no empathy, shows no empathy and disagrees, and a control condition.

That's a little complicated, so I'll try to bring it to a journalistic context on misinformation. (In the interview, Pradella allows the thought experiment, although the study was not about journalism or misinformation, which might both affect the results.) Picture a mainstream journalist interviewing an anti-vaccine activist on television, while another person who shares anti-vaccine views watches and evaluates the situation. The journalist is either empathetic or not, and either shows explicit disagreement or not.

Even though the study was not in a media or misinformation context, I'll keep the parallel along as a thought experiment.

In the study, the outsider observed the interaction and was then presented with questions that measured their empathy toward the out-partisan [the journalist], their warm or cold feelings towards them, the degree to which they would feel comfortable discussing the given issue [vaccines] with them, and their perception of the correctness of their own beliefs on the issue.

The results start out reassuringly: observing the out-partisan [the journalist] showing empathy led to a greater willingness to empathise with them and have conversations with them, and reduced hostility towards them. What's more, it had no effect on belief superiority:

the empathy by the out-partisan did not cement the views of the observer – the anti-vaccine beliefs, in my example. The same worked the other way around: if there was no empathy, observers became more hostile, less empathic and less willling to engage in a conversation. "This suggests that the absence of understanding contributes to hostile partisan divides", Pradella writes.

Now comes the disappointing part: for empathy to have the positive effects on observers, the empathiser cannot show disagreement. When the out-partisan [the journalist] shows empathy but adds a critical point to disagree, the effects disappear.

In a closer analysis of the results, Pradella finds that the out-partisans who showed empathy were perceived by the observers to be more empathic, more in agreement with one's own side, and less typical of out-partisans [other journalists]. Pradella concludes that it might be the perceived agreement that has a promise of improving interactions, not the empathy as such. In other words, empathy is mistaken as agreement, and people soften up and get more ready to talk when they think the other party agrees with them.

Indeed, the role of *agreement* in both of these studies is a little bit disappointing to me. The findings in the first study seem to imply that engaging in empathy with someone you disagree with puts you in a risk of adopting their beliefs. It wouldn't be desirable if empathy with a misinformed person led you to adopt some of the misbeliefs. The second study, when stretched to the journalistic context, might mean that an empathetic interview with an anti-vaccine supporter or similar could be seen as the journalist agreeing with that person.

I must remind again that these studies were not about misinformation and not in a journalistic context, and both of those elements might change the setting considerably. However, one might consider another study, conducted in the UK and Australia, which measured the impact of critical or uncritical interviews of right-wing extremists on the audience. The writers, Diane Bolet and Florian Foos, find that watching an uncritical interview with the activist increased agreement with the extreme-right views by 3–5 percentage points. That may not sound like a lot, but mind you, this was one interview. In comparison, when the journalist challenged the extremist in the interview, the audience's views remained on the same base with the control group.

At first glance, you might say, this study contradicts what Sacha Altay the al. argue about people's beliefs: that misinformation cannot infect people's minds just because it's available. But I think the study by Bolet and Foos has limitations in demonstrating that effect. First of all, there is no data available in this study suggesting that the effect on the audience is

long-term – that a single interview would shift their worldview in the way Sacha Altay et al. describe. Secondly, the interviews they study are about anti-immigration views, not about fringe beliefs. It's notable that the level of agreement with the extreme views in the control groups was 44–45 percent in Australia, and 34–35 percent in the UK. This was the base-level, which went up some percentage points with viewers who were exposed to an uncritical interview. But if the base-level support of these opinions is that high, how extreme are they, really? Maybe the potential for agreeing with the right-wing activists was already quite high, and the participants were more ready to express them after seeing that the journalist was not challenging them.

I have learned that in political science, this is called the social norm effect. People may hold some beliefs half-secretly, but they take cues from other people to judge what is acceptable to say. (See also Bursztyn et al., 2020.) That's why there might be a difference between misinformation just being available in social media as opposed to getting seemingly *endorsed* by journalists. If the media platforms misinformation uncritically, the absence of challenge may act as a signal of social norm – acceptance. What was considered extreme seems more normal and acceptable. Indeed, the participants who watched the uncritical interview the Bolet and Foos study were slightly more likely to think that others in their country agreed with the extreme right views.

Thankfully, this was an experimental study, and the options were deliberately rough to test contrasts. In the real world, there could be several approaches in an interview at once. Certainly when interviewing someone with misbeliefs, a journalist can be critical of the facts but empathetic of the personal experience. I would never suggest empathy with a complete absence of fact-checking.

However, I still wonder what the effect of the mixed approach might be, if empathy is mistaken as agreement, as Pradella's second study seems to suggest. I have chosen to trust that the audience can separate understanding from agreement, but is that not the case?

"Understanding is not the same thing as agreeing, but separating them depends on how the understanding is communicated", Lea Pradella says. "If I say I understand you, you may think okay, then I'm right. We try to look for information that is in line with our views."

Additionally, if someone from my own "camp", mainstream people, would watch me do an empathetic interview with an anti-vaccine activist, they might disapprove of me. There are some studies to prove this, Pradella says. "Empathy is seen as a virtue, but it's seen as less virtuous when someone engages in it towards people that are viewed morally questionable."

When covering people with misbeliefs, there is a choice of angles.

One may try to emphasise risks and dangers or argue for excluding them from public debate. As argued in the previous chapters, this may have an effect of polarising the conversation. I don't mean this as a normative judgment: in some contexts, this might be desirable and serve interests of protecting facts and trust. There is great investigative journalism tracing the origins of disinformation and political manipulation of facts.

Secondly, journalists justifiably engage in factual arguments, debunking and fact-checking. As pointed out previously, there are mixed results on whether these efforts work in correcting misbeliefs. An interesting contribution for journalism from Pradella's dissertation is that a factual approach may increase the appearance of superiority. Indeed, on the fellowship study tour to San Francisco, I heard that some medias in the US are reconsidering their style of fact-checking. It seems that fact-checking articles may be alienating some readers because they create an impression of hierarchy. People just don't want to go to a news site and have a journalist tell them how wrong they are about everything. Instead, journalists are working on approaches that level with the reader in a personal, direct way: "I don't know much either, but let's break this down and find out what's true."

I've heard of at least one example where that worked. The journalism podcast *Question Everything* by Brian Reed featured a married couple on the brink of a conflict, because they read different news sources and couldn't agree on political events. Their biggest argument was that the husband believed in Donald Trump's claims of the election of 2020 being fraudulent. The twist came when they discovered a bipartisan newsletter publication called Tangle, which used precisely the approach described before: the journalist Isaac Saul took the theory of election fraud seriously rather than dismissing it as irrational, and was transparent about his own biases. When reading his super-long, open-minded, gradual debunking of the theory, the husband was persuaded and changed his mind.

This might be seen as adding a layer of empathy into fact-checking: taking people's concerns and conclusions seriously rather than judging them or laughing at them.

I don't know if empathy is a third angle in covering misinformation or an element that could possibly be included in other approaches. Empathy has both promise and risks. It's difficult, even exhausting, to listen to another person with the aim of truly understanding them. When using empathy, you empower the other person and may risk compromising yourself.

To the one on the receiving end, empathy might even be annoying. Power dynamics may have implications for empathy, since nobody wants to feel pitied by the big sister. An empathetic approach may get mixed up with diagnosing – the very trap Zach Mack seemed to avoid in *This American Life*. I think this is very recognisable in journalism: we might approach people who are different or have seemingly weird political opinions with the aim of identifying their core issue and explaining it off so we can return them to the norm. In his column for the magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti*, the political scientist Antto Vihma once named this "the journalist goes to the countryside" genre. After Trump won the presidential election in 2016, lots of city-dwelling, highly educated journalists made a trip into the "deep country" to identify the cause of populism or right-wing thinking. Surely, Republicans were just Democrats who had tragically crossed their wires.

These side-effects of empathy might be result of misunderstanding empathy. First of all, Pradella says, for empathy to truly work, it's more than just listening quietly. When you give something of yourself, the other person is more likely to empathise with you, too. It's likely that empathy only has positive effects if it's genuine. You can't just use empathy as a tool, you have to have a real interest in people. And shouldn't journalists have that, as well?

Returning to the coverage of misinformation, perhaps the other approaches – investigative exposés and fact-checking – serve the interests of countering misinformation. But journalists also have the task of understanding things that are happening, Pradella says. For that task, it might be important to talk to conspiracy theorists, make a case of the importance of understanding, and contextualise it for the audience. "Is that bad?" she asks. "I don't think so."

In her dissertation, Pradella writes about the positive effects of empathy:

> *(—) the feeling of being understood has an overall positive impact on the quality of both non-political and political relationships: It makes people less hostile and more open towards the em- pathizer and may even change their attitudes. This is attributed to empathy providing validation, acceptance, and recognition (Dailey, 2023) and strengthening essential human needs for autonomy, relatedness, and self-esteem (Itzchakov and Weinstein, 2021; Itzchakov et al., 2023).*

As a final remark, empathy may also have positive effects on trust. In their study from 2023, the decision scientist Julia Minson and her colleagues found that when vaccine skeptics talked with a pro-vaccine person who was receptive – meaning they showed a willingness to engage and understand opposing views – the skeptics saw them as more reasonable,

trustworthy, intelligent, and knowledgeable. It also made the skeptics more willing to consider that person's advice.

Sure, they didn't change their views on vaccines or their willingness to get vaccinated, but from the media's perspective, trust would be quite a good outcome.

Julia Minson is also a co-writer in an interesting 2024 article, which hypothesises on the effects on conversational receptiveness and trust in media. By conversational receptiveness, the authors refer to language signals that show openness to considering different viewpoints. They excerpted 600 opinion articles to test on study participants and found that receptive language was associated with reader trust. "Conversational receptiveness might present a cost-effective, scalable approach for media producers to bridge political divides and rebuild trust – without alienating existing audiences", the authors conclude.

I might be tilting at windmills in trying to argue that the aim of understanding and staying open-minded play an important role in covering misinformation. Perhaps there aren't many who disagree. However, I have attempted to lay down some theory that shows the potential and limitations of this type of approach. Through the final interview, I aim to apply the theory within a journalistic context.

IV

Tolerating disagreement and trusting in people: conciliatory journalism

Instead of framing epistemic discussions explicitly as the battle between the truth and non-truth, facts and lies, we could benefit from a more nuanced way of listening and boundary-making. In my opinion, it's a choice that requires listening through misinformation and identifying the underlying roots of the conflict. Movements like vaccine scepticism, which oppose mainstream views and often rely on misinformation, may sometimes be rooted in political or value-based disagreements – issues that could be worth discussing. However, the use of misinformation and aggressive communication often shuts down the possibility of any meaningful conversation before it can begin.

How to disentangle these types of phenomena in journalism? In search of a journalistic language or methodology, I remembered an idea from some years back: a Finnish-born variation of constructive journalism called conciliatory journalism. Created in Tampere University by researchers and journalists, conciliatory journalism is an approach that makes use of the theory of mediation, combining it with ideas of citizen journalism and participatory dialogue. It has been developed into a practical guidebook for journalists dealing with controversial issues. The book provides theory and justification but also hands-on storytelling methods for unfolding complex topics. The example articles cover subjects like nutrition and health, the wolf debate in the Finnish countryside, the views on marriage within the church, and some more local conflicts.

Conciliatory journalism is built upon three principles, loaned from mediation. First, when approaching and covering a conflict one must identify and clarify the essence of it: what is really at stake for people who end up in argument. In this process, some common ground may appear around the actual disagreement. It may be that the parties actually want the same thing but disagree on the means of reaching the outcome.

Second part has to do with listening. All parties must feel that they are heard and there's a genuine interest in understanding different viewpoints. The journalist creates a public space and the rules of that space. The authors of the handbook emphasise that the journalist can still remain critical while engaging in listening.

The third principle is trust. Both the audience and the people covered by the story have to be able to trust that journalistic publicity provides an arena for a balanced and earnest discussion, and that if you engage in the discussion, you also have a chance to defend your viewpoints. If the trust in public conversation is wavered, the parties will withdraw and continue to talk with only the like-minded, which will worsen polarisation. Therefore, journalism has to be able to provide and actively support a space for a meaningful public conversation.

Not coincidentally, one of the founders of the approach, the doctoral researcher Mikko Hautakangas, was also involved with the Tampere University project Reilu media, which aimed to develop a more pluralist and respectful publicity. Hautakangas had a role in running the workshops that collected ideas and experiences from both journalists and people who felt unheard or mislabeled in public conversation. I also took part in one of those workshops in 2022, on the basis of my book. Now, I set up an interview with Hautakangas to ask him about conciliatory journalism and its possibilities with misinformation-driven conflicts.

Hautakangas tells me that the idea for conciliatory journalism was born in 2015, after the populist Finns party got its second major victory in parliamentary elections. It seemed apparent that Finnish journalists weren't familiar with the reality and values shared by the party's supporters. "There was a self-critical discussion within newsrooms on why journalists are so middle-class and in their own bubble that they are unable to see that national-conservative people really exist", Hautakangas recounts.

In the fall following the election, there was another shock in the system. During the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, an unprecedented number of asylum seekers – particularly from Iraq – sought shelter in Finland. While there was a lot of support, compassion and community efforts around the country, the situation also sparked racist movements, hateful speech and even hate crimes. Some of the hostility targeted journalists. It was an intense and challenging time for newsrooms. One journalistic format that drew a lot of criticism involved televised discussions framing immigrant families or their supporters and racist activists as polar opposites in a debate. This triggered a discussion about the media's tendency to either find marginal extremes and polarise the conversation, or to create false balances between legitimate and illegitimate sources. In my opinion, it was a useful debate, showcasing that it matters which opinions the media identifies as the main arguments, and that the marginal, most provocative opinions shouldn't be offered an uncritical and disproportional platform. However, I have been wondering if this lesson carries over to the more recent conversation

on disinformation and conspiracy theories almost like a trauma. Journalists may be so concerned about platforming extremist views or creating false balance that they avoid even approaching extremist-seeming individuals – despite the fact that groups like xenophobic extremists and vaccine sceptics are, for the most part, quite different from each other.

The conversation about framing and platforming comes down to how journalism controls the public space and its boundaries. Hautakangas identifies two concepts that are known in literature. Firstly, the *Overton window* is used to describe the ideas and arguments that are politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time. It's as if you only present the view from this window, and things outside of are disregarded. In Sweden, they call it *åsiktskorridor*: the opinion corridor. The frames of the window or the walls of the corridor may shift, and the push to shift them can come precisely from the extremist margins, who gain legitimacy by being included in this space. As a result, journalists may fear that seriously addressing concerns about vaccine safety could open the topic to debate or give it undue legitimacy – suggesting that all opinions are equally valid, even on issues that have been settled by scientific research.

Related to the Overton window, a more nuanced concept is Hallin's spheres, coined by the journalism historian Daniel C. Hallin in 1968. Hallin divides political discourse into three concentric circles. The inner sphere is the realm where journalists assume a public consensus. It could be, for example, that journalists assume a consensus that economic growth is indispensable, or that all genders should be recognised. The next sphere is the area of legitimate controversy, the standard political debate, where journalists are expected to remain neutral. Whether to raise taxes or cut expenses, those type of things. On the outside, then, is the sphere of deviance, with all of the topics deemed irrational or irrelevant, not worthy of debate. These boundaries continue to shift along with public opinion – and naturally, the public space created by journalists plays a central role in shaping them.

Hautakangas mentions his colleague Matleena Ylikoski, who is writing a doctoral dissertation in Tampere University about pluralism in media. Ylikoski has argued that the Hallin's spheres are too rigid in Finland. In an article by Uusi juttu (Onninen 2025), she explains her view. According to her, Finnish journalists have strongly adopted German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept of public opinion, in which we want to hear all voices, but we are very controlling of how the discussion is conducted. In addition, journalism tends to demand a high degree of expertise from people invited in the conversation. She cites the discussion around minorities as an example: to be allowed to voice your opinion, you need to use the right words, strike the right tone, and ideally hold a

certain position. Even if the goal of this practice is good, it will inevitably exclude a lot of people.

As an alternative, the article says, she offers an idea called “agonistic pluralism”, theorised by political scientist Chantal Mouffe. It’s an idea of a critical and contentious public sphere, in which everything is inherently political and emotional but up for debate. It requires a trust in people, and Ylikoski has it. According to the article, she thinks that people are generally good at tolerating disagreement, as long as they are taken seriously and the arguments provided for them are good.

“As our society becomes more multicultural, pluralistic, differentiated, and polarised, it should logically lead to a shrinking circle of consensus and an expanding circle of legitimate disagreement,” she says to Uusi juttu.

This should be reflected in journalism, too. Mikko Hautakangas voices a similar opinion.

“In order for pluralism [in the media] to move forward, there should be the ability to be more openly political and controversial, to accept that there is some struggle”, he says.

In other words, we should have the courage to keep things in the sphere of debate rather than excluding some opinions and stating a consensus. Hautakangas thinks that the debate around truth and disinformation reflects a desire to depoliticise issues. When we call something “the truth”, as opposed to malicious disinformation, we obscure the ideological connections that any factual statements have, to a degree.

The next question is how the choices made in the public sphere by journalists may affect people: not only on the people involved in a particular article but on the audience and society at large. Hautakangas thinks that the media may have an impact on polarisation in society. In particular, he’s referring to *affective polarization*, which means people feeling closer to their in-group and projecting negative feelings towards their out-group. Affective polarisation enforces social identities and makes people draw quick judgments on their supposed political opponents. It’is generally considered a negative phenomenon, because it hinders cooperation and decision-making and decreases trust. (Reijlan 2020.)

In this process, the media plays an indirect role in shaping people’s understanding of viewpoints around them. Hautakangas sees an issue in the way the media has adapted the logic of social media. Since the data-driven commercial journalism is increasingly about grabbing attention, it leads to a temptation to produce extreme examples, provocative citations, and emotion-stirring headlines. This simplifies complex issues and may create the

illusion of polarised situations, where opposing camps appear to have nothing in common. Lea Pradella explained to me that perceived polarisation can lead to real polarisation, as people feel pressured to choose sides and reinforce their group identities.

Knowing all this, it seems that efforts of affective listening, open-minded debate and trust-building would be welcome, but would they make a difference? If journalists chose to take a more constructive, conciliatory approach to conflicts and complex issues, would people be ready to engage in the mediation? I ask Hautakangas if conciliatory journalism has a proven impact. He starts his answer by reflecting on personal experience, since he has been doing voluntary work in criminal and civic litigation mediation.

"Outside of the media, I have seen time and time again how very capable people are in discussing their affairs. If people are given a chance, they will use the opportunity to be constructive. I trust that people as individuals have much better abilities than the social media around them", Hautakangas says.

While the impact of conciliation is very hard to measure, he believes it has an impact on halting and reversing polarisation. It's attainable in journalism, too, but it's difficult and time-consuming.

"A lot of the work in building trust would have to be done in the background, outside of public eye", Hautakangas says. He mentions an YLE radio program on alternative healthcare, a controversial topic in Finland, from 2016. The journalists, one of them the now-researcher Matleena Ylikoski, worked a long time finding people to interview in the program and building trust with them.

I actually remember that program – I used it as a source for my book. The conversation remained respectful, even though the doctor in the studio was fairly critical of the alternative treatment. Hautakangas thinks that it's precisely the respect that opens up room for critique. "If people feel that they and their affairs are treated fairly, they can also handle critique better. If the critique is done in a fair and justified way, people will get the sense that it's worth staying in this conversation rather than withdrawing."

Hautakangas believes that the same applies to situations where people hold misbeliefs or base their opinions on false information. The key, in his mind, is to take people seriously. "If people have a chance to tell their viewpoint with their own words and they are listened to, it will create space for critical questions, as well", Hautakangas says.

He thinks that when covering misinformation topics, the journalist should make it clear from the outset that they may not share the interviewee's views, but are nonetheless open to listening. This is a kind of honesty that may have been missing from some of the

corona stories. “When a corona critic was interviewed, the interview was followed by a government health authority saying that actually, this is the case. That would be in the end of the article, shedding ridicule on everything that was previously said to the reporter. Those are the spots to look out for: how to contextualise these things without down-grading or stigmatising.”

Hautakangas believes that the power of mediation lies largely in the experience of being genuinely listened to and accepted. “It has to do with agency. When people are taken seriously, they stop being objects and gain agency. A journalist should always provide the experience that when a person takes part in public conversation, they have agency. A vaccine critic may have that experience when they are giving the interview, but afterwards they will read the story where all of the claims are debunked, and the agency is taken away.”

This is an interesting remark to me. I think (as Hautakangas undoubtedly does, too) that wrong claims should be debunked. However, his point makes me think that debunking claims after the fact, by leaning on a greater authority, is like pulling the carpet underneath the person you were pretending to take seriously. I may have even created that impression myself in my book, because I simply didn’t have the information to debunk unfounded claims on the spot. But perhaps if an interview is partially based on misinformation, it requires several rounds of processing the article to give the person a chance to respond to fact-checking.

At the same time, in my experience, these interviews always bring up other things than just the misinformation. Things that could give people agency instead of reducing them to mere victims of brainwash and rabbit holes. Through interviewing people who supported conspiracy theories, I learned historical facts that I didn’t know, viewpoints I hadn’t heard before and experiences that I think would have a broader value for discussion. To name an example, there could be processes and loopholes in the healthcare system which may erode trust. We might not hear about them unless we interview people who don’t trust the system anymore.

Hautakangas wishes that when it comes to misinformation, the media wouldn’t get stuck on the most delicious headline and populist provocation. Even in the most ridiculous-sounding claims there might be something worth discussing in the background. “Instead of repeating a citation that’s misinformation, journalists could try to unfold the related issues and nuance the conversation. But to do that, one simply has to tolerate listening through the misinformation”, he says.

In Hautakangas' thinking, journalism plays a role in maintaining societal peace and pluralistic, participatory dialogue. I ask him if people engaging with misinformation should be a part of that pluralism: if they should have a voice in public discussion. "Of course", he says. "Everyone should. The ideologies and goals then, that's up for discussion. You can listen to Neo-nazis without claiming that their goals of deporting people based on skin colour is politically relevant conversation. You don't have to validate their world view, but the interview can provide an understanding on where the thinking comes from."

Ultimately, that requires a trust in audience to separate understanding from accepting. "It can be the audience's responsibility, too, to separate racist claims and the experiences that lead to them", Hautakangas says.

I don't know if journalists in Finland always have this sort of trust in the audience. At least within the professional community, leaving interpretation on the audience's responsibility tends to spark criticism. It seems irresponsible. The audience might criticise that as well: I recall that Laura Saarikoski, the former U.S. correspondent for Helsingin Sanomat, once wrote that whenever she interviewed Trump supporters, she would receive critical feedback for "giving them a megaphone". And in 2022, when Yle published a documentary series called *Suomineidot* about three national-conservative women, it got criticised for normalising nazism. Ville Vilén, the head of the department, defended the documentary series in an Yle article, stating that it's also the media's role to show that these views exist. "It would be much worse to hide difficult things. Freedom of speech and democracy are based on bringing up thoughts that are not the same as yours. Then they are discussed and evaluated", he said to the journalist.

This, I have learned, is a more common view in Denmark, where the sphere of legitimate debate might be larger than in Finland. In discussions at the Constructive Institute, I was told that Danish people prefer bringing controversial opinions to public light so that they can be openly criticised. However, I have uncertainty if this principle expands in all topics or if it's mostly present in the discussion on immigration and its problems. In any case, there could be historical reasons to the differences between countries: perhaps in Finland, extreme opinions have been seen as costly, and seeking for consensus has served a purpose in maintaining peace and unity. With Russia as our neighbour, it has been wise to stay united and sweep away disagreements.

Returning to the responsibility of journalists, there is also the fear of being perceived as naïve. I tell Hautakangas that it was one of my fears when I was writing the book about conspiracy theorists: that while I think I'm just listening to people's stories, I'm actually

unknowingly used as a tool for dangerous purposes. And to talk about empathy or the feeling of being heard in the context of journalism – it's kind of embarrassing, soft.

"The fear of being called naïve is a common sin among journalists. It's safer to be cynical", Hautakangas says. He admits that he also has a hard time talking about having faith in people or naming the method empathy, even thought that's what is ultimately is. "Journalism is also about other things than citing facts and understanding society. It's always about increasing understanding towards difference, too."

As a bonus, he says, being empathetic and naïve can get you to places that you would never get to if you were only protecting yourself and being cynical and careful.

In other words, I conclude: fully disregarding wrong opinions and avoiding conflict will ultimately leave a part of the world unseen.

V

What to consider if you write about misinformation movements?

Lastly, I want to share some thoughts that might be helpful in bringing all of this theory and arguments into practice. Some of the following are practical lessons from my own work, some of it is based on the research and interviews for this report. It goes without saying that in this topic, the context, time, place, publication, and people involved may vary hugely, so it's always up to individual judgment whether these seem helpful. These thoughts mostly apply when covering people with relatively low political power in a stable and generally trusting political environment.

If you are a journalist writing about citizen misinformation movements and your angle is to understand different views, here is my advice.

1. Framing and format

Avoid exaggerating phenomena which might be marginal. Even when fringe opinions gain attention in social media, it's possible that the number of people who really support them is relatively miniscule. To cover it disproportionately may distort the picture for the audience and enforce the power and legitimacy of marginal groups. Of course, even small percentage of the population may have influence, but put it in a context.

Be cautious about spreading fears and creating affective polarisation. The perceived rising threat of disinformation may draw attention from other societal issues. Remain cautious about implying there is a high risk of violence or criminal action, unless there is clear evidence. Be aware of the cultural, societal context: Nordic countries have a different political landscape than the United States, for example.

Consider the format that's best for the story. A live interview in the news with people demonstrating against mainstream scientific understanding might not be the best idea. It is hard to fact-check statements in real time. If possible, spend time on background work, try to find representative people and work on building mutual trust. Prepare to do several rounds of interviews and fact-checking, if possible. It is more fair and leaves a better

impression of the media if the people you interview understand the context and can respond to criticism.

2. Approach and process

Approach people with genuine curiosity. It might be hard to get an interview from people who are distrusting of mainstream information and the media. They don't want bad publicity, and they probably already have their audience elsewhere. You shouldn't really trick people into an interview. But if you think that you're worth their trust and sincerely interested in hearing their viewpoint, bring it up in your interview request. Be transparent about your intentions from the start but also ready to reconsider your prejudices.

Avoid judgmental questions. In our interview, Lea Pradella brought up the common techniques of qualitative interviews that help bring up the interviewees' own perspective and the subjective dimension of knowledge. Start with easy topics and work towards the hard ones. Don't ask "Why didn't you get vaccinated?" but instead "What made you decide…?"

Identify the core facts and check them fully. People who support conspiracy theories or hold misbeliefs may have lots of data and documentation to back up their views. Fact-checking everything will be exhausting and frustrating. If possible, see if you can determine the backbone of their argument and focus on that. This is also complicated: you might find a mix of solid and unclear evidence, and sometimes the science is right and still doesn't prove the argument. For example, it may be that there has been a serious issue in one climate study, but the whole evidence of climate change doesn't rest on that study. In the end, it's typically impossible to debunk conspiracy theories fully, because they are based on supposedly undiscovered evidence or assumptions about the future.

One interesting thing about anti-vaccine activists, at least, is that they often bring up evidence from court cases. They might claim that a vaccine is dangerous because someone won a court case against the medical company, or something like that. However, scientific facts aren't proven or unproven in courts, but court cases may be based on other technicalities. The legal field is a distraction and often not relevant in a factual sense.

Still, while researching their arguments you may come across something else interesting: misconduct by the police or authorities, for example. Keep an open mind.

Grant agency to the people you interview: give them a chance to respond to criticism. Already in the interview, you can bring up critical points or doubt. If you discover later on that they are misinformed or have suspicious connections or activities, call back.

Grant them the same rights than other interviewees – but not more, of course. You don't have to write the article hand in hand, and you should have the courage to be critical.

3. Writing

If you work on understanding, state your purpose and angle in the story. This goes for most journalism anyway, but to avoid accusations of platforming and normalising, you can explain why you have chosen to do the story.

Don't repeat and reproduce hateful speech. If you write about people with racial prejudices, antisemitist beliefs et cetera, it's probably unnecessary to reshare all of their exact quotes and imagery. This doesn't mean sugarcoating and protecting them, but you can probably get by with a few examples and indirect describing. Minorities in question shouldn't have to read hate speech reprinted, in my opinion.

It might also be ill-advised to reshare direct links and social media profiles, because that will usually lead to more followers and visibility.

Contextualise the beliefs without diagnosing. This is difficult to do, but often if you ask people to tell how they arrived in their views and what happened in their lives at that time, the story may shed light to why they believe the things they do. In my opinion, you could trust the reader to understand the background. If you bring in a psychologist or similar to explain misbeliefs or distrust on a general level, you should be quite mindful how you construct the story. It's not fair to create an impression of a backhanded diagnosis in a journalistic piece.

Avoid name-calling, irony or strong emotional language. You can call out wrong information, but be respectful of people.

Be precise with identifying views, and don't categorise people from the outside. When it comes to misbeliefs and conspiracy theories, there is a whole range of different views and commitment to them. Even if distrust may cause people to accept misinformation of a range of topics, a climate sceptic is still not a flat-earther is not an antisemitist. Allow people the agency to define their opinions themselves, and avoid lumping people together.

Respect people's right to disagree and accept difference. There has always been and will always be distrusting people and people with controversial, ungrounded, or weird-seeming beliefs. It's unlikely that you can change them, and sometimes it's best to just let them be.

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