Commentary on "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and coping with the post-truth era"

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Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook offer a comprehensive and thought-provoking examination of the role of misinformation in shaping current political discourse. The authors underscore the urgent need to examine the determinants of misinformation in modern politics and the need to identify robust strategies to counter the deleterious effects of misinformation not only for solving pressing social problems, but more generally on the health of democratic politics. The stakes are clearly high. Considering the issue of climate change—an issue we study in some depth—a coordinated campaign of misinformation has recently culminated in fundamental misunderstandings of scientific findings at the highest levels of the American government. Recent political events in the United States have led to not only a vocal climate skeptic taking the reigns of the Presidency, but also the appointment of climate deniers in key positions relevant to the environmental policy, such as the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. We thus wholeheartedly agree that there has never been a more pressing time to critically evaluate the implications of misinformation for society and governance.

One of the main claims of the paper is "that to be effective, scientific research into misinformation must be aware of the larger political, technological, and societal context" (pg. 3). We would actually go further to suggest that not only should misinformation researchers be aware of wider societal context, but this *context must be fully integrated into explanations* of the relationship between misinformation and key social issues. Against this backdrop, we elaborate on the importance of political polarization in understanding and countering misinformation. The remainder of this commentary proceeds as follows. We begin by providing a more in-depth discussion of the political science literature on polarization, making the critical distinction between elite polarization, mass polarization, and the relationship between the two. Next, we outline why understanding elite polarization is essential for countering misinformation, focusing attention on the nexus of partisan motivated reasoning and elite cues. We conclude with suggestions on how research on misinformation should devote more attention to elites and their influence on public opinion.

Elite and mass political polarization

The literature in political science draws important distinctions between political polarization among elites and the American public. There is overwhelming evidence that elites in the US are polarized on a broad range of political issues, particularly when considering voting behavior in the US Congress (Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; Rohde 1991; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal

2006). Moreover, given the broad empirical support for elite-level polarization, there is now a robust literature on the non-institutional and institutional drivers of the political divide (see Hetherington 2009 for an overview). Non-institutional factors such as party switching in the wake civil rights legislation in the 1960s (Sundquist, 2010), a rise of income inequality, and the powerful influence of interest group politics (McCarty et al., 2016) have all facilitated an increase in the ideological differences between parties and a decrease in the ideological diversity within parties. Furthermore, polarization is reinforced by institutional changes in the U.S. Congress, including the rise of committee government which places considerable power in the hands of the party leadership and promotes party uniformity on policy issues. The end result of these developments is that elected officials—particularly, in the U.S. Congress—have the tendency to gravitate towards more extreme ideological viewpoints and have little incentive to moderate these viewpoints based on the preferences of their local constituencies.

The literature on *mass* political polarization, however, is less conclusive. Relying on decades of public opinion data, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) argue that there is little evidence that mass polarization in overall ideological positions or on specific issues. A number of studies, however, challenge Fiorina and colleagues' conclusions, arguing that alternative definitions and measures of polarization provide evidence more closely aligned with the differences observed for elites (Hetherington 2009). Yet, while there is considerable disagreement among political scientists on *mass* polarization, scholars generally agree that *partisan* polarization—also referred to as "party sorting"—is on the rise (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). Partisan polarization reflects the tendency for individuals to align with (or sort into) the political party which reflects their underlying preferences. Historical examples of partisan polarization include conservative voters in the American South switching from the Democratic to Republican party, as well as liberal voters in the Northeast switching from the Republican to the Democratic party. Overall, this literature suggests the increased importance of party identification for understanding issue positions amongst voters.

There is also a growing body of scholarship on the relationship between elite and mass political polarization (see Fiorina and Abrams, 2008 for a review). While there is an ongoing debate regarding the direction of causation between elite and mass opinion, at least for partisan polarization, it is generally understood that elite moves are followed by mass shifts in opinion (Jacobson, 2003). Elite opinions, moreover, are often transmitted through the news media, both social and traditional. Although Lewandowski, Ecker, and Cook devote considerable effort to outlining the role of social media in spreading misinformation, polarization of the *traditional* media landscape must not be overlooked. The overwhelming majority of Americans still get their news from traditional media sources (Mitchell et al., 2016) and, even on social media, users often link to stories in the traditional media. With the rise of ideologically slanted cable news outlets (e.g., Fox News and MSNBC), we are beginning to observe what could be labelled "partisan news sorting" on the part of the electorate.

Political polarization and the challenge of correcting misinformation

Psychologists have understood for decades that individual cognitive processes are determined by two competing forces: the motivation to be accurate and the motivation to reach a particular conclusion that conforms with pre-existing beliefs and feelings (see Kunda, 1990 for a review)—that is, reasoning is *motivated*. For some time now, political scientists have been interested in examining the phenomenon of *partisan* motivated reasoning. Substantial empirical evidence suggests that individuals accept (reject) political information that validates (disagrees) with pre-existing beliefs (e.g., Taber and Lodge, 2006; Kahan et al. 2011; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Druckman et al., 2013; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Bolsen et al., 2014; Bisgaard, 2015). Voters, in other words, are likely to consider their political affiliations, ideologies and worldviews when processing new information that may conflict with the implications of their long-held beliefs.

While the authors are clearly aware of the importance of source credibility on correcting misinformation (e.g., Swire, Berinsky, Lewandoesky, and Ecker, 2017), we believe that the paper would benefit by more fully incorporating research on partisan motivated reasoning. The process of motivated reasoning is relevant when citizens are faced with corrective information which may conflict with politically salient beliefs. A large body of research shows that correcting misconceptions is not a straightforward task and can even be counterproductive. Of particular interest among social scientists is the possibility of such corrections to *backfire*---that is, to not only not weaken, but to actually strengthen acceptance of misconceptions among voters. Experimental research has found such an effect in such politically salient topics as whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction just prior to the US invasion in 2003 (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), health care reform and the presence of "death panels" in the United States (Nyhan and Reifler, 2013), and climate change policy (Zhou, 2016). This research generally underscores the importance of *partisan* source cues in correcting misconceptions on politically polarized issues.

Aside from how people process information, especially information which may conflict with beliefs or feelings, there is also a growing understanding of the role that elites play in the opinion formation and decision-making of citizens. It is well established that voters are largely uninformed and ignorant about politics and government (e.g., Lippmann, 1922; Converse, 1964; Carpini et al., 1996; Bartels, 1996; Kuklinski et al., 2001) and that they rely heuristics, including co-partisan elite cues, for guidance when deciding whether to support a given policy or for whom to cast their ballot (Zaller, 1992). We therefore would expect that elite communication will drive public opinion, especially on areas where political elites are divided (e.g., Druckman and Bolsen, 2011; Bartels, 2002; Druckman et al., 2013). As the distance *between* parties and homogeneity *within* parties on a given issue increases (i.e. increased elite polarization), it is expected that: (1) political elites will more effectively signal prefered issue position information to voters (Levendusky, 2010); and (2) that the effects of partisan motivated reasoning among the electorate will become stronger (Druckman et al., 2013).

Elites are integral in correcting misinformation on polarized issues

Although individual-level psychological processes are central to the literature on misinformation, the importance of political elites is often understated. Climate change—a topic discussed at length in Lewandowski, Ecker, and Cook—is textbook case for when elites matter. First, in the American context climate change is a hyper-politicized issue on which elites are extremely polarized (see Dunlap et al., 2016). In the current U.S Congress, for instance, it is estimated that 59% of House Republicans and 73% of Senate Republicans have publicly expressed either climate change skepticism or outright denial (Koronowski, 2017). Second, the environment is consistently a "low salience" issue in the minds of Americans (see Guber 2003). For the issue of climate change, recent survey data from February 2017 show that only about 2% of Americans considered it to be the "most important problem facing the country" (Gallup, 2017). Third, low salience combined with the inherent complexity of the climate change issue increases the likelihood that citizens will rely on elite cues when forming and updating their opinions. While estimating the influence of elite communication on public opinion regarding climate science and policy poses a difficult academic challenge, there is empirical evidence which hints at such a link. For example, recent observational data analyses show how attention to climate change in Congress (i.e., roll-call votes, hearings, press releases) affects media attention on the issue, which in turn increases concern about climate change among the American public (Carmichael and Brulle, 2017).

In the end, although the "bottom-up" solutions proposed by Lewandowski, Ecker, and Cook are essential, one cannot ignore the fact that elites are central actors with significant influence on opinion formation. How should one integrate the study of political elites into research on misinformation? This is obviously a challenging question. One important area is figuring out ways to reduce the supply of misinformation generated by elites (e.g. conservative think tanks, right-wing media, conservative political actors, etc.) Solutions such as the "technocognitive" approaches proposed by the authors, which target specific opinion leaders, offer substantial promise to this end. Another area of interest is ideologically-consistent solutions to countering misinformation. As discussed above, considerable scientific evidence suggests that co-partisan elites can help shift in-group opinions on polarizing issues. One example of how this might play out in the real world is the case of former Congressman Bob Inglis (R-SC). Inglis has made it his mission to find conservative, free-market solutions to climate change. Obviously, taking such a stand is not without risk—Inglis was unseated in the 2010 primary runoff in part due to his support for climate policy. Nevertheless, only by fully considering both "bottom-up" and "top-down" solutions do we have any hope in solving mass misconceptions on issues such as climate change.

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