PERCEPTIONS

Policy Brief

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How can policymakers tackle misinformation and disinformation?

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● **Executive Summary**

Information behaviour of migrants or intended migrants is studied by researchers to understand the implications of information over migration choices. Also information circulating in host countries regarding migration can be the object of study of the complex migration research field. Assuming that the concepts of misinformation and disinformation are complex to define and to identify in the media landscape nowadays, this policy briefs aims to analyse the definitions and the dynamics of these two "information drifts" around the concept of migration and to investigate how policymakers can tackle misinformation and disinformation in the migration field.

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● Introduction

Issues connected with distorted information depend on the inaccuracy, the incorrectness, and the deception of the information itself and they are usually divided by researchers into "misinformation" and "disinformation".

The concepts of misinformation and disinformation are complex. People tend to use these terms interchangeably, even though they are not synonyms. Indeed, there are numerous and sometimes contradictory definitions of them (Treen et al., 2020; Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2022), misinformation can be defined as "wrong or misleading information" that is unwittingly provided while disinformation corresponds to "deliberately false information". Hence, inaccurate information might result either from a deliberate attempt to deceive or mislead (disinformation) or from an honest mistake (misinformation) (Alonso et al., 2021). In this sense, "misinformation is misleading information that is created and spread, regardless of whether there is intent to deceive. Disinformation is misleading information that is created and spread with intent to deceive. Using these definitions, it can be seen that misinformation is a subset of information, and disinformation is in turn a subset of misinformation, and therefore studying misinformation by default includes disinformation" (Treen et al., 2020, p. 3). Karlova and Fisher (2013) understand misinformation as inaccurate, incomplete, vague, or ambiguous information, but it has to be perceived as such by the receiver in a given moment and in a specific context (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020).

Why is it so difficult to identify misinformation? Given the technological development, the flow of information is nowadays much faster than in the past, and so it is the possibility of receiving false information. Information overload, fragmented media landscape, repeated exposure and circular reporting can cause online false information to gain acceptance, which in turn generate false beliefs that, once adopted by an individual, are highly resistant to correction (Del Vicario et al. 2016). Professionals claim that the World Wide Web is a fruitful environment for the massive diffusion of unverified news since online social media facilitate the aggregation of people around common interests, worldviews, and narratives (Del Vicario et al. 2016) and information can spread without being checked (Donato et al. 2022).

Many researchers are concerned about the negative consequences of misinformation at individual or societal level, claiming it can affect people's views and values concerning public, political and religious matters or health, scientific, environmental, and economic matters (Ruokolainen and Widén, 2020).

Key Issues:

1. The difficulty in the identification of misinformation and disinformation.

2. The growing flow of information online.

3. Misinformation in migration field.

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This policy brief focuses on two different forms of misinformation, being it unwittingly or deliberately spread and being widespread online or offline, developed around the concept of migration: the general idea of security threats caused by misinformed migrants and the polarised mediatic representation of migrants in host countries, that leads to radicalisation of public opinion towards migrants' communities.

● Is there a relationship between misinformation and potential threats?

In relation to migrant information behaviour, the spread of informationa and communication technology and social media in recent years has helped migrants and asylum seekers in gathering information and keeping in touch with other people but at the same time it has increased the risk of encountering misinformation[1] (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020; Alonso et al., 2021). According to Ruokolainen and Widén, "migrants and asylum seekers come across different types of misinformation: these include official information that is inadequate or presented inadequately, outdated information, misinformation via gatekeepers and other mediators, information giving false hope or unrealistic expectations, rumours, and distorted information. The diversity of misinformation in their lives shows that there is a need to understand information in general in a broad and more nuanced way" (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020, p. 1).

Migrants use different information sources and channels, but they tend to prefer informal sources and word of mouth, both in person than online. The fact that information circulates through word of mouth implies that there is less tendency to check the source of the information compared to reading written information or online information. This is the reason why people should be educated in news literacy. Misinformation can be spread among migrants or intended migrants through their family members, their friends, their acquaintances, traditional media, and social media, while disinformation is often deliberately spread by smugglers and agents in the context of irregular migration (Shuva, 2021). More specifically, PERCEPTIONS Consortium findings state that "smugglers can also prove to be an important source of information, as they are key figures making it possible for migrants to cross international borders irregularly and may influence migrants' decisions on chosen routes, timing, and destination – they can even act as triggers by encouraging and

Key Findings:

1. Migrants risk to encounter misinformation.

2. Migrants tend to prefer informal sources of information and word of mouth.

3. Absence of correlation between the potential misinformation of migrants and criminalisation in host countries.

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[1] The term "misinformation" is used in this policy brief to refer to "inaccurate information regarding migration infrastructures or service provision, migration pathways, countries of transit and countries of destination".

inciting migration with promises of 'an easy way out'. The relationship with them is often ambiguous, changing over time, and the feelings that migrants have towards them depend on the outcome of their experience. In some instances, refugees state that they are grateful, in others that they have been deeply deceived where others still hold contradictory feelings".

Overall, in accordance with recent literature (McKenzie, Gibson & Stillman, 2013; Shrestha & Maheshwor, 2020; Shuva & Nafiz Zaman, 2021) most migrants seem to be perceived as naive and misinformed and their lack of accurate information seems to be linked with the increase of radicalisation and security threats (both for migrants and host countries).

It is very important to highlight that we are not implying that migrants are generally misinformed or completely unprepared when deciding to migrate. There is evidence of the influence given by positive narratives of destination countries over migration aspirations but this is not considered misinformation per se. The wide range of responses that generated the results of the PERCEPTIONS research on this topic prove the complexity of the phenomenon and its various nuances.

For the "Survey of first-line practitioners' perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic" conducted by PERCEPTIONS consortium (García-Carmona et al., 2021), 788 practitioners were asked to answer different research questions on the role of inaccurate information in the migration field. In particular, this section of the policy brief focuses on the following question: "In the view of first-line practitioners, do certain inaccurate perceptions and narratives about Europe lead directly or indirectly to security threats?".

The results emerged from the survey show that most respondents agreed that inaccurate information could place migrants in situations of risk, both in terms of using dangerous routes to Europe and engaging human smugglers.

However, the majority of respondents did not believe there was a direct relationship between misinformation and a greater likelihood of migrants committing crimes or radicalisation. Despite this overall agreement, it should be underlined that the responses were quite polarised:

- intergovernmental practitioners, practitioners from transit countries, and practitioners working in enforcement services tended to support the idea that the spread of inaccurate information about Europe among migrants can lead to increased crime and radicalisation;
- practitioners working in support services disagreed that inaccurate information causes such risks.

In terms of radicalisation, surveyed practitioners mostly disagreed that inaccurate information fosters radicalisation. Non-governmental faith-based practitioners, in particular, strongly disagreed with any association between radicalisation and misinformation.

This range of responses to questions surrounding misinformation mirrors findings from the PERCEPTIONS literature review, in which it was observed that "there is little consensus on the role of false narratives and their impact on migrants" (D2.2 Secondary analysis of studies, projects, and narratives, PERCEPTIONS,2020, p. 47). Overall, however, respondents tended to believe that migrants who make decisions based on inaccurate information are more likely to encounter threats themselves (e.g. use of dangerous routes or human smugglers), but are not more likely to pose a threat to host societies (e.g. via crime and radicalisation)[2].

● Representation of migrants in the host countries: the case of Italy

The expression "misinformation about migrants" refers here to the mediatic representation of the migrant or the migrant community in host countries. Attitudes towards migrants have been largely studied by researchers and a common finding is the rapidity of the spread of disinformation and hate speech on traditional media and mostly social media in the last decades (Hainmueller et al, 2014; Chaudhry, 2015; Ben-David et al., 2016; Bruno et al, 2018). Media play an important role in the process of social construction of reality: according to a study conducted in 2018 on Italian media landscape regarding migration, "the news trace the outlines of the spaces defining the identities – who is in, the belonging, who is the other, as well as the explanatory dimensions and the attributions of responsibility that prelude the formation of public policies – what happens and what should be done" (Binotto & Bruno, 2018). In the media space, the ability or inability to talk about a complex phenomenon like international migration contributes to the creation of consolidated images and narratives representing the "foreigner".

According to their research, there are three major frameworks with which migrants are "narrated" through traditional media to the Italian audience[3]:

- The *security frame*
- The *landings frame*
- The *humanitarian frame*

The first frame refers to the securitization of the nation that often occurs through the generalisation, the criminalisation, and the passivation of migrants in order to preserve the "identity" of the nation. The difference between 'us'

Key findings:

1. The distorted image of "migrants" as subjects of the social space.

2. How Italian traditional media show migrants.

3. Migrants narrated as passive subjects in host countries media landscape.

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[2] For further information on security threats see PERCEPTIONS D2.4 Collection of threats and security issues
[3] The research conducted refers to the years 2011-2018

(native Italian) and 'them' (migrants) is increasingly emphasised and this contributes to the creation of so-called 'folk devils' or public enemies, characters on whom the blame for what goes wrong in society is poured. This kind of seemingly neutral but insidiously pervasive communication breeds in the viewer a disillusionment about peaceful coexistence with those who are not compatriots. The findings about this frame are supported by research conducted on the USA media coverage: the study focuses on two narratives about migrant criminality that are prevalent in both liberal and conservative media. First, the belief that a large proportion of undocumented migrants are gang members who intend to extend their criminal influence, and second, a belief that a high proportion of children trying to gain entry into the United States "are being used as pawns by the smugglers and traffickers" (Moore-Berg et al. 2021, p. 2). In the research, they examined the relationship between migrant criminality narratives, psychological processes of empathy and dehumanisation and anti-migrant policy support, finding out that people's biased perception is due to overestimations of the phenomenon and deep-rooted cultural stereotypes.

In the second type of frame, the landing is presented as the icon of the prototypical arrival since "immigration" is often considered synonymous with "illegality" and "irregularity". The overflowing boat symbolically represents the 'wave' of arrivals that would not even be noticed by land and the way it is narrated can easily manipulate the public opinion. One effect of this media portrayal and the frequent juxtaposition of the terms 'migrants' and 'landings' is that a large proportion of regular migrants are often not conceived of as 'migrants'. Moreover, the complexity of definitions in migration studies can lead to misleading estimates in the research field of migration and in some contexts, it can be instrumentalised for political discourse, like the case of politicisation of migration done by far-right parties (McAuliffe, Abel, Kitimbo, & Galan, 2022). In addition, part of the landing frame are the numerous tragedies at sea which, just like natural disasters, generate moral panic.

The third and last frame conceptualised by Bruno and Binotto is the humanitarian frame that is considered the other side of the coin: while on the one hand there is a continuous criminalisation of the immigrant, on the other hand the attitude is completely pietistic towards migrants. Reports representing this frame are however a minority in Italian media so it cannot be considered as a "counter frame" of equal relevance. This pietism can also be seen as part of a more "Eurocentric" view that considers European countries as the only way to help and rescue migrants seeking help. One aspect to be noted is the fact that in this frame there is a major presence of images of women and children, which are almost totally absent in the other frames.

The absence or little presence of migrant voices on traditional media[4] can be considered as an act of omission, to show them as passive beings. Migrants should be given the opportunity to narrate their own stories because in order to counteract the initial difficulties of integration and cultural barriers, everyone should be aware of the different aspects related to international migration (history and theories of migration, current data of human mobility around the world, comparative analysis of migration rates among countries, multiculturality, opportunities of exchange and so on). Transparency and awareness about the phenomenon could help counter the spread of false information both in origin and in destination countries.

● Recommendations

1) **Governments might strengthen Institutional communication strategies both in countries of origin and destination.**

Institutional information strategies should be thought to reach all the stakeholders in the migration field, from intended migrants to first-line practitioners and policy makers and it should include the voices of diaspora communities to increase the credibility and the authenticity of information. The various stakeholders within the field of migration could find useful help in the handbook created by PERCEPTIONS Consortium: it's a easy-to-use resource that summarises the main findings of the research and it provides insights and responses to common questions about the role of perceptions and narratives in the decision-making processes of migrants; creative tools and good practices to tackle some of the challenges related to migration; and a review of immigration policies and recommendations for improvement based on the research conducted in the PERCEPTIONS project.

2) **Governments should avoid strict censorship on media sharing policies.**

Removing information can be considered censorship and it could have unexpected consequences in the long run. Therefore, policymakers should look for different solutions to avoid misleading information to go viral on social media and on the network. Regular reporting could be a first step to get to know the dimension of the problem at the local level and develop structured strategies to limit it.

Key recommendations:

1. Strengthen national institutional communication.

2. Avoid direct censorship of confirmed false information.

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[4] For more information about this topic, check PERCEPTIONS Policy Brief "Improving mainstream media reporting on migration". Available at https://www.perceptions.eu/policy-briefs/

3) **Governments should invest in education and empowering of people through "news literacy"[5].**

Given the statement that all information is information (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020), teaching people how to discern reliable and clear information from manipulated and polarised information should be one of the first steps to counteract the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

4) **Governments should invest in detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation.**

Investments in technology companies' research on fact-checking, bots' detection systems, supervised machine learning algorithms should be considered a priority in counteracting misinformation.

5) **Governments should conduct awareness-raising campaigns for citizens regarding the phenomenon of international migration.**

With reference to the migration field, awareness-raising campaigns should be conducted both in origin countries and destination countries to avoid the spread of inaccurate information. As a concrete example of awareness campaigns, the different creative awareness materials created by PERCEPTIONS Consortium can be used as a model to define better and more effective information campaigns to create new and more inclusive narratives. The materials and services are provided for first-line practitioners, civil society organisations, local community activists and migrant organisations.

3. Invest in news literacy.

4. Invest in bots' detection and fact-checking systems.

5. Conduct awareness-campaigns both in origin and destination countries.

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[5] According to **Stony Brook- Center for News Literacy** the right method to evaluate news is the IMVAIN method of deconstruction:
- **Independent** sources are preferable to self-interested sources.
- **Multiple** sources are preferable to a report based on a single source.
- Sources who **Verify** or provide verifiable information are preferable to those who merely assert.
- **Authoritative** and/or **Informed** sources are preferable to sources who are uninformed or lack authoritative background.
- **Named** sources are better than anonymous ones.

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o **Websites**

www.perceptions.eu

project.perceptions.eu

o **Deliverables**

D2.2 Secondary analysis of studies, projects and narratives. https://project.perceptions.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/07/PERCEPTIONS-D2.2-Secondary-analysis-of-studies-projects-and-narratives.pdf

D2.4 Collection of threats and security issues. https://project.perceptions.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/07/PERCEPTIONS-D2.4-Collection-of-threats-and-security-issues.pdf

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