Public Authorities as a Target of Disinformation

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Abstract: Disinformation is a part of a modern digitalised society and thus affects public authorities´ daily work. Through disinformation, malicious actors can often erode the fundamentals of democratic societies. In practice, this can be achieved by influencing authorities' decision-making processes and creating distrust towards public organisations which can weaken authorities' ability to function. In Finland, public authorities have relatively transparent and open decision-making processes and communication practices compared to other democratic societies. This transparency and openness can be seen as a vulnerability, increasing the opportunities for malicious actors to use disinformation. The authorities of public services are also seen as producers of evidence-based official information. In general, Finns have very high trust in public authorities. Trust has a major impact on societies' psychological resilience and susceptibility to disinformation. The results of this article strengthen the idea that disinformation weakens authorities' ability to function. The producers of disinformation, aided by citizens' high confidence of public authorities, aim to utilise authorities' communication by misrepresenting the content according to their own agenda. In this study, our purpose is to describe public authorities' experiences relating to disinformation in their own organisation. This study follows a qualitative design framework by analysing data collected in September 2021 using inductive content analysis. The empirical data includes 16 government officials' interviews with themes exploring how disinformation affects their daily activities and why they are targets of disinformation. This article is part of a larger project relating to counterforces and detection of disinformation. The results contribute towards a broader understanding on how different types of public authorities, ranging from health to security organisations, communicate in complex social media environments.

Keywords: disinformation, communications, decision-making, public authorities, national security

1. Introduction

Public authorities face significant challenges in social media networks and the overall media structure. Their status as an information provider has been challenged by the changes in societies' communication and information avenues. The internet and social media have made it easier to form global networks and produce content in new ways, and thus, power has shifted to those who can influence information flows according to a specific agenda (Ikäheimo & Vahti, 2021). The algorithmic structures of popular social media sites are one of the factors that contributes to polarising public opinion and specifically, the intentional spread of inaccurate information can accelerate such developments (Pariser, 2011; Bozdag & Van Den Hoven, 2015; Woolley & Howard, 2016; Lazer et al., 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). Even before the prevalence of social media, there were suggestions of social capital being strategically captured by political forces (Acemoglu, Reed & Robinson, 2014; Satyanath, Voigtlaender & Voth, 2017).

With the increasing speed of information exchange, the amount of disinformation circulating has been growing (Matasick, Alfonsi & Bellatoni, 2020). Disinformation should be understood as a separate term from fake news. Fake news frames information problems as unrelated incidents, whereas disinformation represents a more systematic and strategic approach when aiming to disrupt information flows (Bennet & Livingston, 2018). Disinformation can be used by political or governmental actors to manipulate public opinion online and reduce trust in existing institutions and authorities (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Distorting and questioning public authorities' messages is a significant challenge that threatens national security (Vasu et al., 2018). One way to counter the impacts of disinformation is efficient communication. The opportunity for institutions to communicate and engage with the public have expanded, but so have the challenges of providing sustained, timely, accurate and relevant information (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Sunstein, 2018; Tufekci, 2017).

In recent years, disinformation has been a popular research subject but there is little research about its relations to public authorities. It seems that western societies' public sectors are particularly vulnerable to digital propaganda, such as disinformation. Compared to other western democracies, Finland has relatively good resistance to digital propaganda. In Finland, there are coordinative responses to disinformation, public officials react quickly to false claims and citizens still have high trust in mass media (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). Transparency and openness have been defined as the guiding principles of Finnish public authorities' communication, allowing citizens to evaluate institutional practices (Ministry of Justice, 2019). According to official instructions, in unusual circumstances, public authorities have the responsibility to communicate effectively to citizens and form a realistic picture of what is happening (Prime Minister's Office, 2019).

The security system in Finland is based on co-operation between state and civil society actors. This might be one element that helps to counter the effects of disinformation (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). Furthermore, institutions represent a key pillar in the formation of society and trust is the foundation for the legitimacy of public institutions and a functioning democratic system. Public trust towards authorities in Finland is high and that has traditionally supported the workability of administrative and political models. This can be seen in Finland's successful response to the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2021; Jallinoja & Väliverronen, 2021). Therefore, to maintain the legitimacy and sustainability of Finnish institutions, we should strive to understand the dynamics and dangers of information attacks that can reduce trust and increase polarisation.

This study aims to explore how public authorities view themselves as a target of disinformation and what aspects might cause vulnerability. Study focuses on how public authorities experience their position as a possible target to disinformation. The empirical data consists of 16 public authorities' interviews. This article argues that developing co-operation between authorities and coordinating counterforces are essential in countering disinformation.

2. Data and method

The data was collected in September 2021 by conducting semi-structured interviews with representatives from 15 public administrative institutions, which contained 21 questions exploring two key themes related to disinformation situational awareness. Specifically, the themes 'disinformation as a phenomenon from an organisational perspective' and 'current procedures' contained questions such as "What do you consider as disinformation?" and "Have there been any cases of disinformation in your organisation, and if so, how did you handle them?".

The interviewees represented 15 public administrative fields including national security, ministries, legal institutions and emergency services. Invitation letters were sent to organisations in coordinative positions in their respective administrative fields. The research conducted followed the ethical principles published by The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2012). Furthermore, the selected organisations had autonomy to decide who attended the interview. In total, 16 interviews were conducted, the majority of which were online. Furthermore, the average length of an interview was 50 minutes. The number of public authorities in Finland is relatively small and compared to this, 16 interviews provides adequate data sample. However, even tough interviewees spoke in behalf of their organisation, it is not possible to distinguish perfectly what is their personal opinion and what is the organisation policy.

To analyse the data, inductive content analysis techniques were used (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This approach included open coding, categorisation and abstraction of data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The text was coded using qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti 9 (Atlas.ti, GmbH, Berlin Germany) and the data was organised by separating segments where the participants discussed being targets of disinformation. In total, there were 68 incidents. These findings were then further coded, focusing on different perspectives around being potential targets to disinformation. This coding process led to a further 11 groups, from which 8 themes were formed.

3. Results

The 8 themes identified describe how public authorities view themselves as targets of disinformation. The themes are ordered by incidence, with the most common occurring theme being presented first. The main results are summarised by Table 1. The first column presents the highlighted themes, the second column describes the content of these themes and the last column describes why the interviewees considered the themes challenging to public authorities.

Table 1: Summary of the results

Highlighted Theme	Theme Content	Challenge
Openess of Action by Public Authorities	Authorities communicate actively and openly; authorities' messages are truthful	Validating the information can be slow; disinformation spreads fast
Questioning Expertise	There are many sources of information; public authorities do not have monopoly status in information spreading	Questioning the expertise of public authorities aims to weaken trust
Public Authorities are not Potential Targets for Disinformation	Public authorities' task is to help citizens; public authorities' status protects them from disinformation	Public authorities do not prepare for disinformation
Duties of Public Authorities	Public authorities' duty is to guide citizens and to communicate what is proper behavior in society	Public authorities end up in confrontational positions in public discourse
Abuse of the Position of Public Authorities	Exploitation of the public authorities' trust	Public authorities' messages are used in disinformation
Resources for Combating Disinformation	There are not enough resources to repel disinformation or it is not the core duty of authorities	Detecting and countering disinformation is perceived as communication experts' duty
Disinformation is Used Internally	Agencies' employees post wrong information for example about the working conditions	Media publishes distorted information about the working conditions in public agencies
The Significance of Authorities' Co-operation Networks to Disinformation	Finnish public authorities are exposed to disinformation in their work-related networks	Disinformation can be part of larger influencing campaigns

Openness of Action by Public Authorities

The interviewees perceived the openness of actions, and communication, by public authorities as the most significant factor contributing to susceptibility to disinformation. Finnish public authorities must communicate openly and swiftly, although at the same time these represent vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the documents related to the actions of public authorities are primarily public. Even negative documents are made public. Some interviewees have perceived a change in how the media operates around these issues; even the largest media outlets no longer correct erroneous information like before. Some of the interviewees believe that reporters no longer function as gatekeepers for publishing information.

Most public authorities publish a considerable number of notices and announcements and have an extensive social media audience. Particularly, security authorities are an attractive target for news reporting. *"As we have an estimated, and I mean I'm just spitballing here, 50 000 news reports per year"*, *"Yearly, we publish from 7 000 to 10 000 notices and announcements, and multiple times as many social media posts. Nowadays we are like a news agency, in a way"*. Public authorities are expected to instantly react to matters and to partake in public discourse.

Public authorities cannot defend themselves from disinformation in all cases because legislation prevents them from publicly disclosing certain matters as far as they are subject to confidentiality. Additionally, public authorities only publish validated, truthful information. In some cases, validating information takes time and creates an opportunity for disinformation to spread in the absence of official information.

According to the interviewees, relatively open publication of matters in the preparatory phase is a part of the openness of action by public authorities. Unfinished matters or decisions may be targeted by disinformation by framing them as value judgements and spreading deliberately misleading information. Based on the interviews, civil servants would like to simply prepare and present issues for particular questions of political decision-making without expressing their opinions on what is being prepared. *"I think that maybe those are more… I mean after all since political decision-making is about making value judgements and thus, like, particularly the value judgements and their correctness, they are much more easily influenced and that is why I believe that disinformation is certainly directed more towards that* [political decision-making] *and is probably more of a challenge there than in preparatory work by civil servants"*.

Questioning Expertise

Based on the interviews, civil servants perceive themselves to be targets of disinformation as representatives of an expert organisation. The product of an expert organisation is often information based on research. Disinformation seeks to call into question the expertise of public authorities or to make organisations seem untrustworthy. Questioning expertise aims to undermine the information produced by public authorities, alongside trust. Focusing on definitions, pointing out small errors of fact and polarising public discourse are methods used to question expertise. In many sectors, public authorities have an undisputed special position as the producers of official information.

Expertise in the communication of public authorities is challenged by converting the public discourse into one compatible with one's own world view by attempting to dispel the original topic of discussion. The interviewees say that communication has changed considerably in the past decade. Public authorities no longer have monopoly power to produce and share information. In today's news environment, citizens are able to source information from multiple different sources. *"Our greatest task is, in particular, that we are a part of what makes democracy work. And in order for it to work, someone must offer enough validated information so that people can make informed decisions. But it is not our job to affect what decision a person ends up making after assessing and weighing these different elements".*

Public Authorities are not Potential Targets for Disinformation

According to the interviewees, some functions of public authorities are neutral and simply meant to help people, so there is no need to target them with disinformation. A certain kind of public authority status provides protection and, even in challenging circumstances, public authorities whose work is non-political are respected. The interviews showed that public authorities believe themselves to be experts in preparing against threats and that their staff is conscious of different threats. *"I mean citizens do have a lot of trust and a kind of neutrality perhaps brands* [public authorities]. *It is after all humanitarian action, broadly defined; it aims at helping"*. Many of the interviewees recognise disinformation as a phenomenon and the negative consequences it carries but believe that it has no significant effect on everyday activities.

The Finnish language is viewed as one of the factors that protects against supranational disinformation campaigns. From an international perspective, Finnish is not an appealing language for spreading disinformation.

Duties of Public Authorities

According to the interviewees, the legal duties of public authorities include citizen advice and guiding the public to follow common rules. Actions by public authorities help to set the limits of how one ought to act within the society and aim to influence citizens' attitudes and behaviour by means of effective communication.

Duties of public authorities also include issues that provoke passionate opinions, such as health, welfare and security. *"So precisely these kinds of topics that have strong interest groups that, from our point of view, maybe appear as spreaders of information, somewhat"*. The interviewees thought that public authorities as organisations are targeted by sensationalised news precisely based on their duties. Public authorities often have to strongly interfere with citizens' basic rights and make significant administrative decisions in the course of their duties. When it comes to research activities, the partial polarisation and antagonization of the research topics in public discourse was brought up in the interviews. Disinformation is used in attempts to affect how results of research are utilised in decision-making on emotive issues (e.g. equality and non-discrimination).

Individual actors may spread disinformation to take a position on the acts of public authorities. There might be frustration directed at the public authorities because a desired service or help has not been provided. In some cases, media may be used to present biased information, which considerably affects other citizens as users of public services.

Abuse of the Position of Public Authorities

The interviewees mentioned that the trust and reputation of public authorities is abused by means of disinformation. The notices and announcements made by public authorities are used to construct content that

suits one's own needs, which is then published as the original. Often the motivation is to make public authorities party to a divisive debate involuntarily. *"I would also add to this that what I call the 'don't shoot the messenger' problem. So, this problem is born out of the fact that people think of reporting as an opinion"*. The interviewees said that the information produced by public authorities was used indirectly as a tool of disinformation, *"our news was then, in a way, used as a tool of disinformation to be used in another direction so that we kind of were, how would I put this, the ball was played through our court, that we were not directly the target"*. Some of the interviewees used the term 'framing'. Here, framing means emphasising certain issues in a way that, in a specific context, they become stronger than what their original meaning would entail.

Resources for Combating Disinformation

A significant number of the interviewees believe that there are not enough resources to combat disinformation or that combating disinformation is not a core duty of public authorities. Currently, disinformation is primarily combated using resources available to communications. *"Our resources are quite quickly used up if we are going to start chasing all those who share incorrect stuff and spin our publications by sharing them with incorrect accompanying info"*. To some extent, detecting and combating disinformation is made more difficult by the typical way in which civil servants only work during office hours. Combating the spread of incorrect information outside of office hours produces difficulties.

Disinformation is Used Internally

Based on the interviews, disinformation is also utilised within the operation of public authorities. Employees may publish incorrect or altered information because of a lack of resources or a bad working environment. The interviewees believe that the media is particularly interested in publishing news that involves some kind of antagonism between the employee and employer. *"In some cases, it can be a kind of 'cry for help' phenomenon, whereby it is thought that the solution to the problem, or for example the source of the problem is for instance the lack of resources, and in order to get more resources, it is thought that it is necessary to reveal defects"*.

Spreading incorrect information about the lack of resources of public authorities may, according to the interviewees, affect trustworthiness and, at worst, lead to citizens not utilising the services they are offered. Disinformation is used to erode the public image of the employee and to partially damage the duty of loyalty owed by the employee. *"I think that also the common duty of loyalty to the employer has probably suffered and been forgotten, and it is being broken, sometimes even severely, precisely owing to social media, because that is all that is needed"*.

The Significance of Authorities' Co-operation Networks to Disinformation

The interviews brought up the effects of disinformation on the network-like co-operation of public authorities domestically and abroad. A Finnish public authority may be targeted by disinformation, for example through the EU-community. For instance, in serious security-related situations, disinformation does not necessarily directly target a single public authority, but instead the effects reach all the actors involved through organs and networks of co-operation. *"It is really a kind of analysis of this phenomenon, like, more broadly as opposed to relating to just Finland, that we know how that method is used and how it then connects as a part to something bigger, and what its role is in this kind of broader campaign of influencing"*.

According to the interviewees, disinformation is used in attempts to influence the pillars of society by eroding trust. *"Yeah it is in a way the goal of taking a stand, or yes, in the broader frame of reference, it does also affect comprehensive security's … co-operation model, which it seeks to erode in different ways, so that if I started to produce disinformation and, for example, attacking the Finnish state, then I would certainly start by eroding the pillars of society that have traditionally been sturdy, which effectively means that if I were to prepare this kind of broad operation of influencing then I would surely start by gnawing at the activities of public authorities or their co-operation"*.

4. Discussion

This study explored how public authorities view themselves as targets of disinformation and the aspects that might make them vulnerable to it. The main results pointed out that authorities in different organisations

consider open decision-making processes, openness and transparency as potential causes of vulnerability to disinformation. Documents produced by Finnish authorities are often public and based on information that is considered official. In certain instances of communication, validating information takes time and allows disinformation to spread in the absence of official information. However, this openness is crucial from the viewpoint of the citizens, who expect open and clear communication from public authorities, especially during crisis situations (Mitu, 2021). The interviewees noted that especially security authorities are attractive targets for disinformation because they are active in their communication and have an extensive social media audience. In certain circumstances, the duties of public authorities include interfering with citizens' basic rights, as well as functions relating to health and security. The nature of these duties and negative experiences of authorities' activities may make authorities susceptible to being targeted by disinformation. On the other hand, respect for authorities, their neutrality and the assistance they provide to citizens are factors that protect authorities from disinformation.

Disinformation often aims to reduce citizens' trust towards public authorities and question the expertise of the public authorities. Disinformation may aim to point out that public authorities' communication only serves the state management and not citizens (Hillebradt, 2021; Mitu, 2021). According to the interviewees, for authorities' believability and their status as experts to be retained, they must enjoy citizens' trust. Disinformation aims to question authorities' expertise and thus sow distrust. The expert status of authorities can also be abused by disinformation by changing the original context to suit specific agendas. The interviewees also mentioned that authorities' trustworthiness and public image can be weakened within organisations by distorting the content of communication. The interviewees believed that the media is particularly interested in publishing news that involves some kind of antagonism between employer and employee. Furthermore, the interviewees noted that spreading false information about public authorities' lack of resources can negatively impact trustworthiness and, at worst, lead to citizens not utilising the services offered to them.

The results show that authorities' limited resources do not allow for efficient combating of disinformation in real-time. However, according to the interviewees it is not clear if the public authorities need to intervene or control social media content and correct erroneous information. They highlighted the increasing number of information channels in the current media environment as a challenge. This hinders the role of the public authorities as content providers. In the interviews it also became clear that public authorities don't have enough resources to detect and counter disinformation. Multiple organisations have been established, sanctions to spreaders of disinformation has been called out and underlined the responsibility of the media platforms to encounter this challenge (Alemanno, 2018).

It is notable while interpreting the results that public authorities' understanding about being targets to disinformation may be difficult because of the nature of the phenomenon. Public authorities can perceive fake news and misinformation as a similar kind of problem as actual disinformation. However, from the theoretical perspective, disinformation is systematic and strategic in action, but for public authorities, other kinds of misleading and incorrect communication may appear as disinformation. Questioning the authority's disposition, messages or expertise may not be an actual disinformation campaign (Filipec, 2019). This study indicates a contradiction between previous studies regarding how fast and coordinated Finnish public authorities react to disinformation (Biola & Papadakis, 2020). In this study, it seems that Finnish public authorities don't always react fast and coordinated to disinformation cases.

To conclude, it seems that public authorities think that disinformation is a single-case phenomenon and less of a systematic influencing campaign. Transparency, trust and neutrality can both expose to, and protect from, disinformation. Countering disinformation is challenging if public authorities feel that they are safe from disinformation campaigns based on their status, or if they feel that disinformation does not affect their daily routines. Based on the research results, we suggest that Finnish society's resilience to disinformation could be improved by promoting co-operation between authorities and by designating one actor to develop strategies to counter disinformation.

Acknowledgements

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