

Why is misinformation on misinformation successful?

Alberto Acerbi



Concerns about misinformation are all-time high

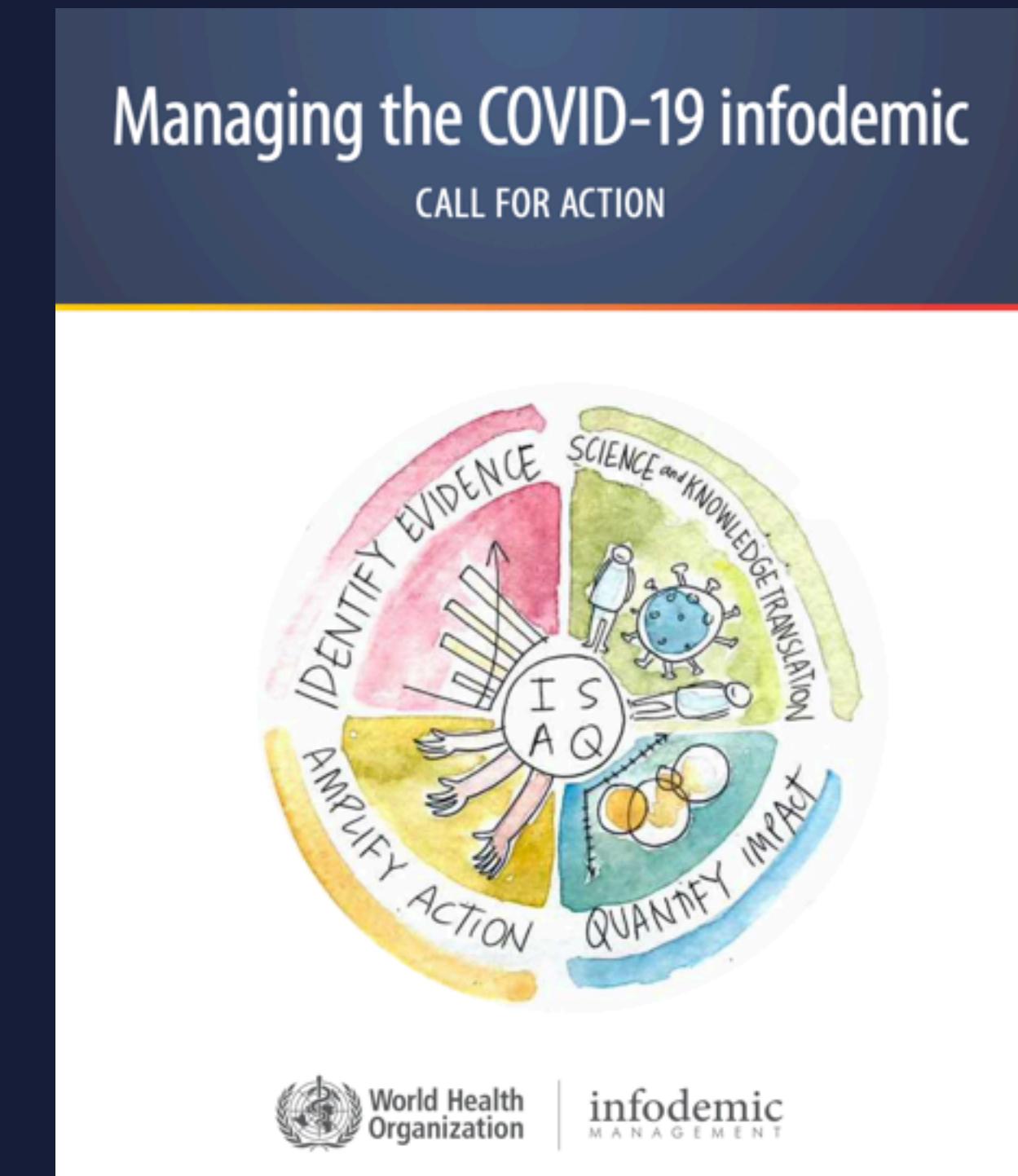
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Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation

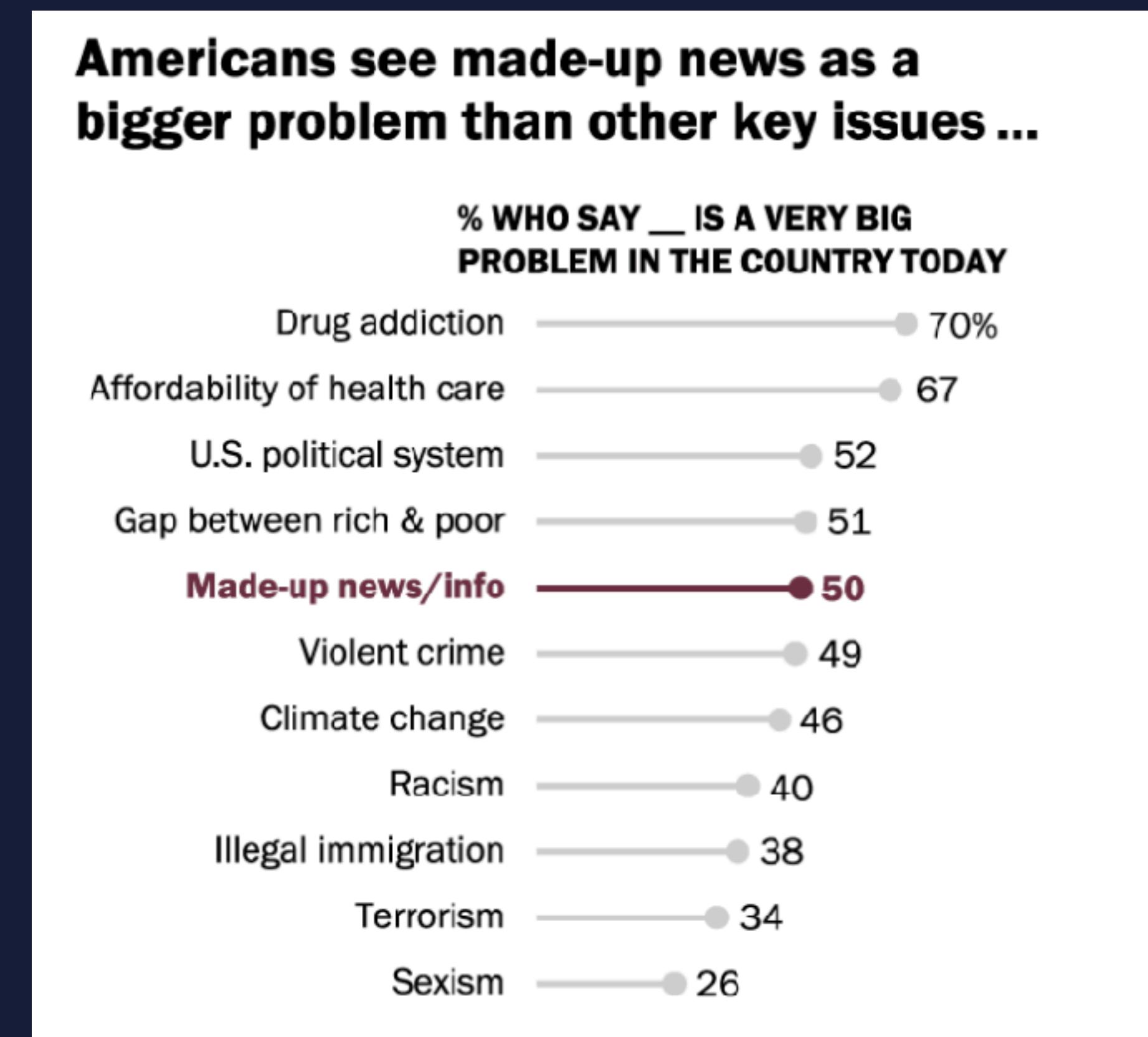
Joint statement by WHO, UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC



Concerns about misinformation are all-time high

And this virus had help. A “syndemic” is the intersection of two epidemics—two diseases ravaging a population at the same time, exacerbating each other. HIV weakens the immune system, for instance, which makes people more likely to develop tuberculosis. The world witnessed something similar this year. We live in an ecosystem that allows viruses to cross from wildlife to humans more often and spread farther and faster than ever before—that gave us SARS-CoV-2. But the virus emerged in an information ecosystem that helps misinformation and lies spread faster than scientific evidence, weakening our ability to respond to new threats. That made the pandemic far worse.

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Democracy in the Digital Age

Democracy in the Digital Age explores the effects of digital tools on politics, journalism, and the economy in democratic cultures. [Can freedom of speech survive fake news?](#) Have social media platforms poisoned political debate beyond recovery? Conversely, can digital tools be used to shore up and support democratic politics? Will digital tools revolutionize our economy for the benefit of all—or merely allow the 1% to hide their dirty business? This is the main track of the conference, and it is primarily aimed at a hybrid audience.

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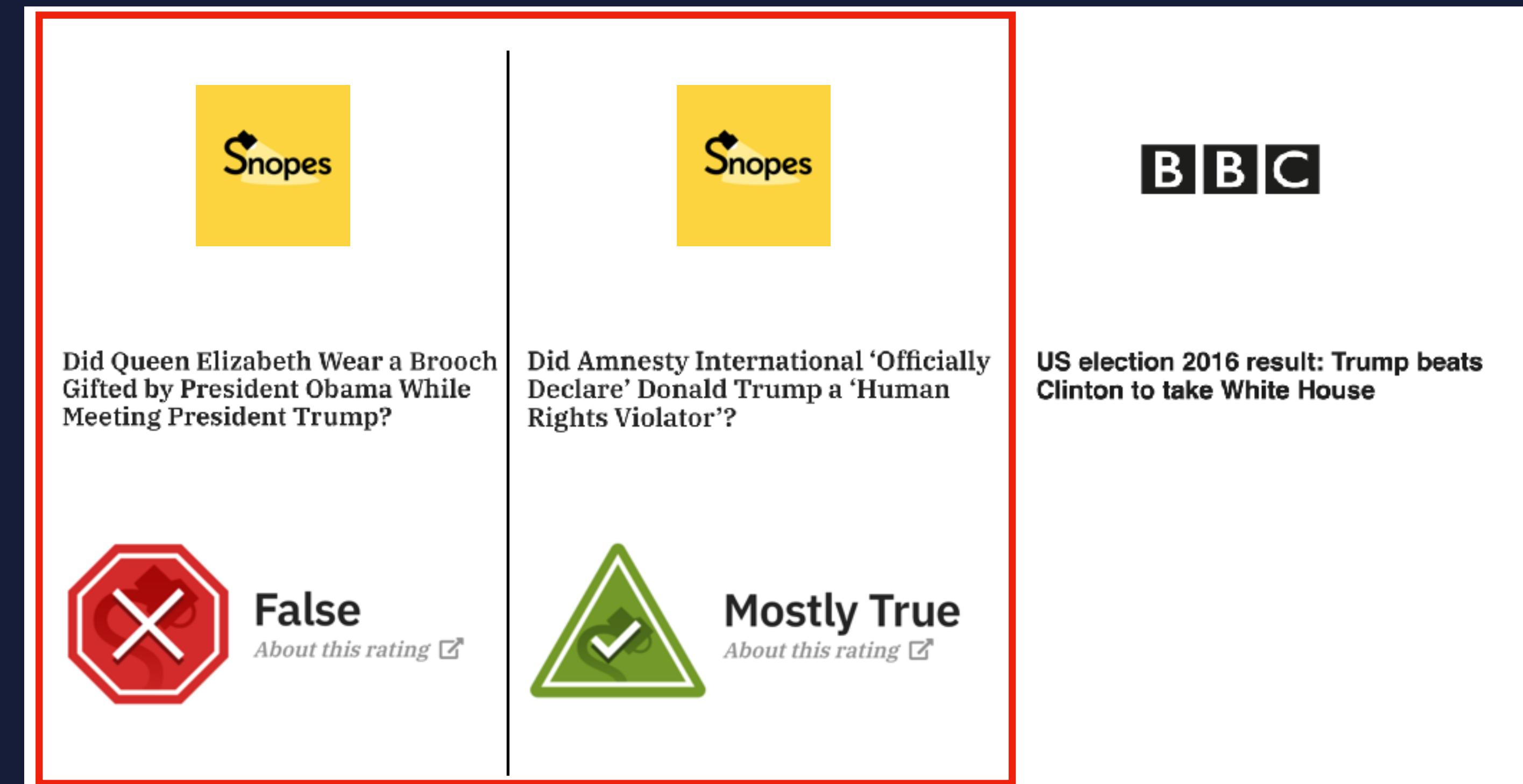
- Misinformation
 - is abundant on social media
 - has a relative advantage with respect to true information
 - influences people's behaviour

Abundant on social media?

- “*0.15% of Americans’ daily media diet*”, Allen et al., 2020
- “*Only 1% of individuals accounted for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared*”, Grinberg et al., 2019
- “*The vast majority of Facebook users in our data did not share any articles from fake news domains in 2016 at all*”, Guess et al., 2019
- “*Of the 2.7 million tweets in our data, only 85,344 ($\approx 3\%$) contain links to national news websites, fake or real. Of the tweeted news links, 3,269 ($\approx 4\%$) come from websites with a history of publishing fake news*”, Osmundsen et al., 2021

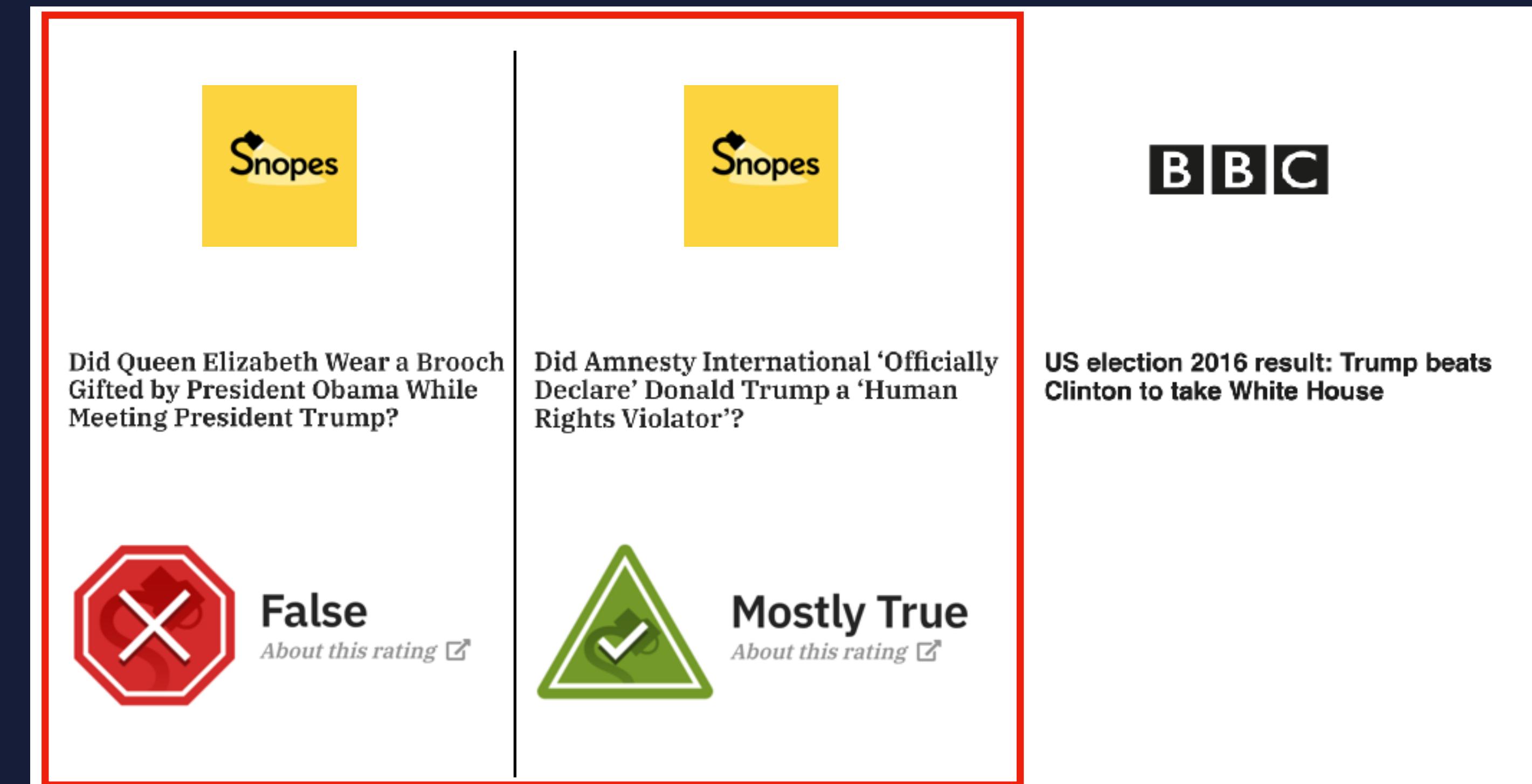
Has a relative advantage with respect to true information?

- “False news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people”
- “Falsehoods are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than the truth”
- “Falsehood also diffused faster than the truth” (~6 times faster)



Has a relative advantage with respect to true information?

- “**Debunked rumours** reached more people than the **confirmed rumours**; the top 1% of **debunked rumour** cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the **confirmed rumours** rarely diffused to more than 1000 people”
- “**Debunked rumours** are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than **confirmed rumours**”
- “**Debunked rumours** also diffused faster than **confirmed rumours**” (~6 times faster)

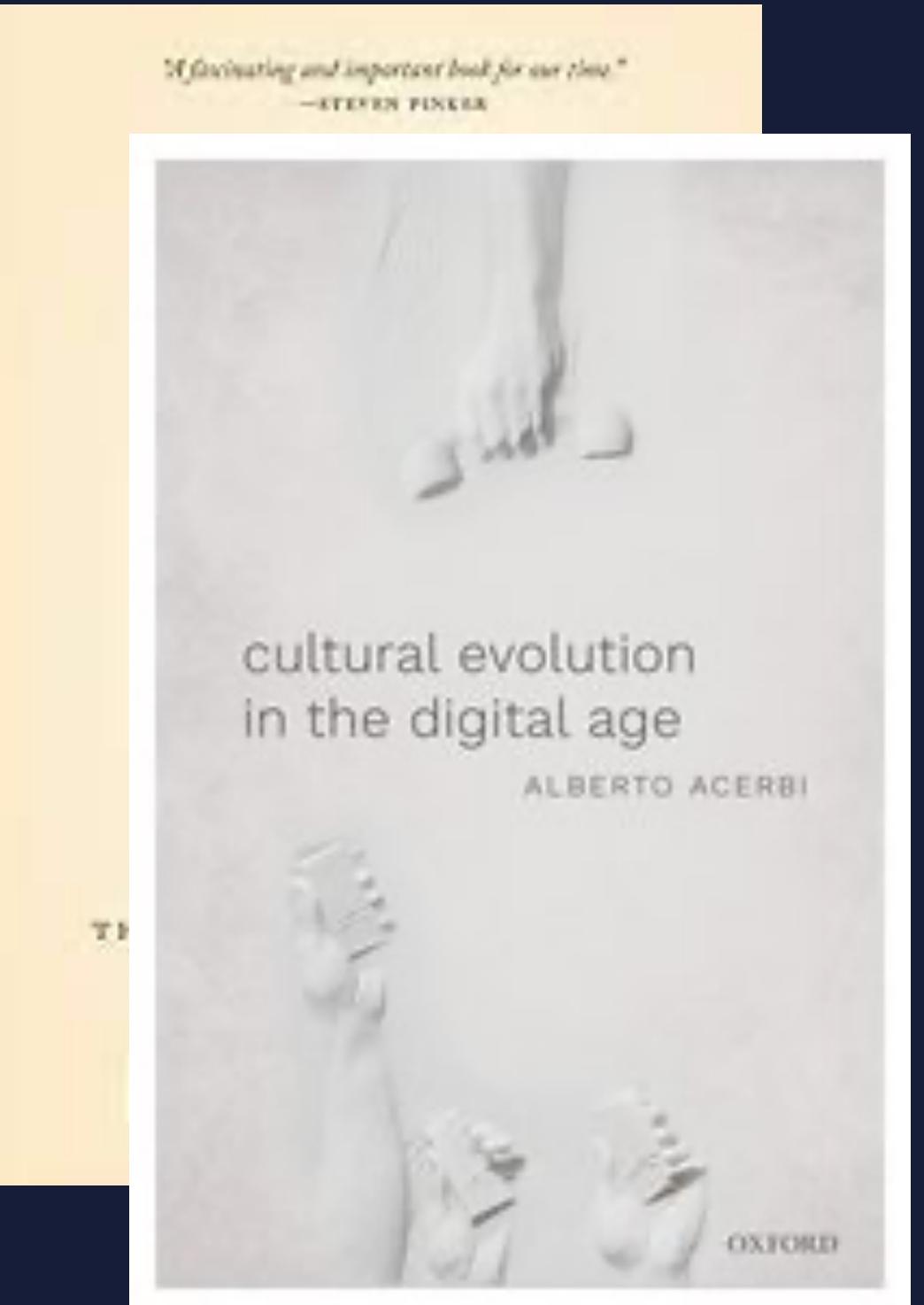


Influences people behaviour?

- Engagement is not impact on beliefs and behaviours.
- People engage with misinformation for various reasons:
 - to signal political affiliation and group membership (Osmundsen et al., 2021)
 - to socialise (Berriche and Altay, 2020)
 - because is fun/interesting (Acerbi, 2019)
 - to verify whether it is true - or to say it is not (Tandoc et al., 2018)

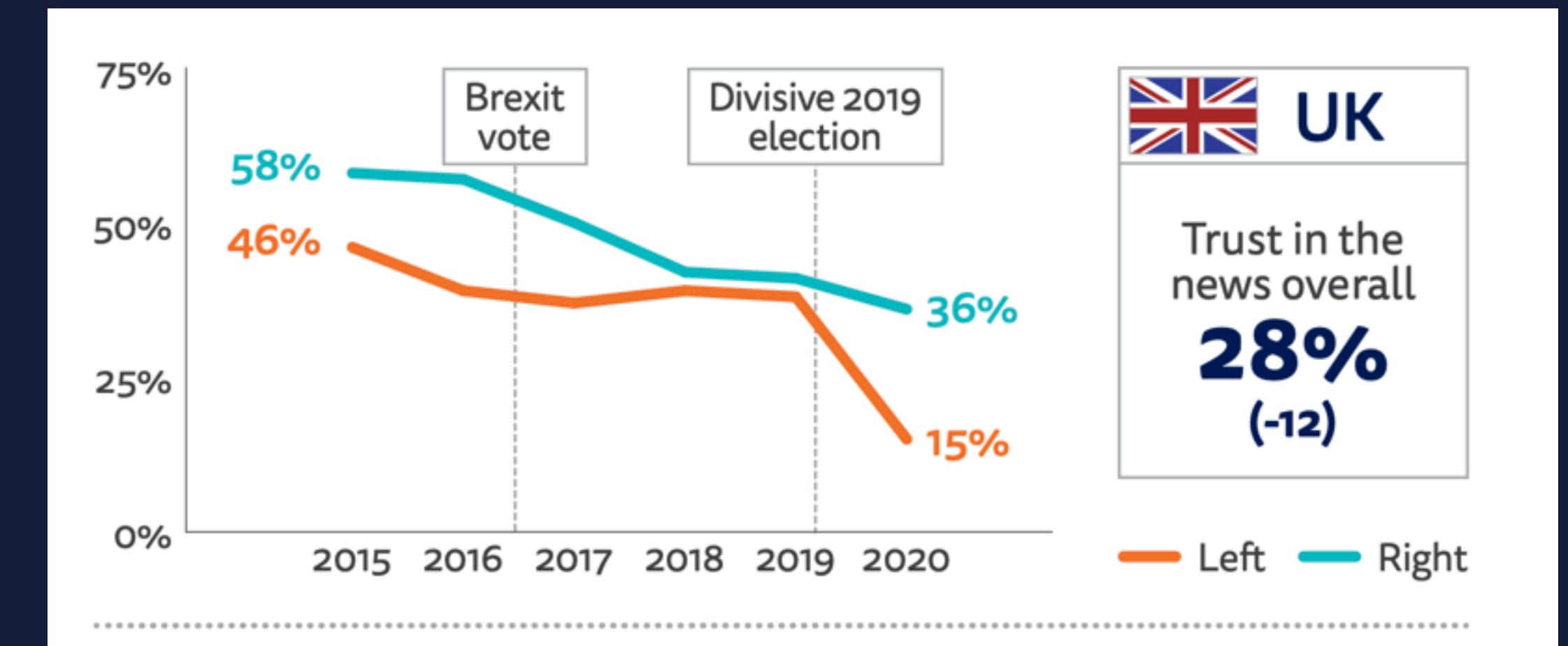
Influences people behaviour?

- Engagement is not impact on beliefs and behaviours.
 - People engage with political misinformation of the same political slant (Alcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Guess et al., 2018)
 - Evolutionary-inspired accounts of social influence predict people being “strategic” social learners, not easily gullible.



Misinformation on misinformation is a problem

- Trust in media - “*We observed overall levels of trust in the news at their lowest point since we started to track these data*”, Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*



- Resources used to “fight disinformation” can not be used otherwise

Why is misinformation on misinformation successful?

- Methodological aspects (defining “fake news”, interpreting data from social media, etc...)
- Cognitive aspects: cognitive mechanisms contribute to the cultural success of ideas, either by enhancing their plausibility, the amount of attention they receive, or people’s willingness to share them (Sperber, 1996).

Overestimation of others' gullibility

- We may overestimate the reach and the effect of misinformation as we believe that *other* people are more gullible than us.

13. How much of the information that you see on Facebook do you believe to be true?
Asked of those that currently have a Facebook account

All or most of it	5%
Only what I get from friends and family	34%
A little of it	47%
Almost none of it	13%

14. Do you think most people on Facebook...
Asked of those that currently have a Facebook account

Are too quick to believe all or most of what they see	81%
Can distinguish between what is true and what isn't	19%

Overestimation of others' gullibility

- We may overestimate the reach and the effect of misinformation as we believe that *other* people are more gullible than us.

Samples	n	Self	Perceived influence of fake news on	
			Republican voters	Democratic voters
Republicans	429	2.41 (1.25)	2.96 (1.06)	3.43 (1.06)
Independents	500	2.26 (1.13)	3.07 (1.09)	3.03 (1.08)
Democrats	370	2.30 (1.21)	3.33 (1.02)	2.93 (0.98)

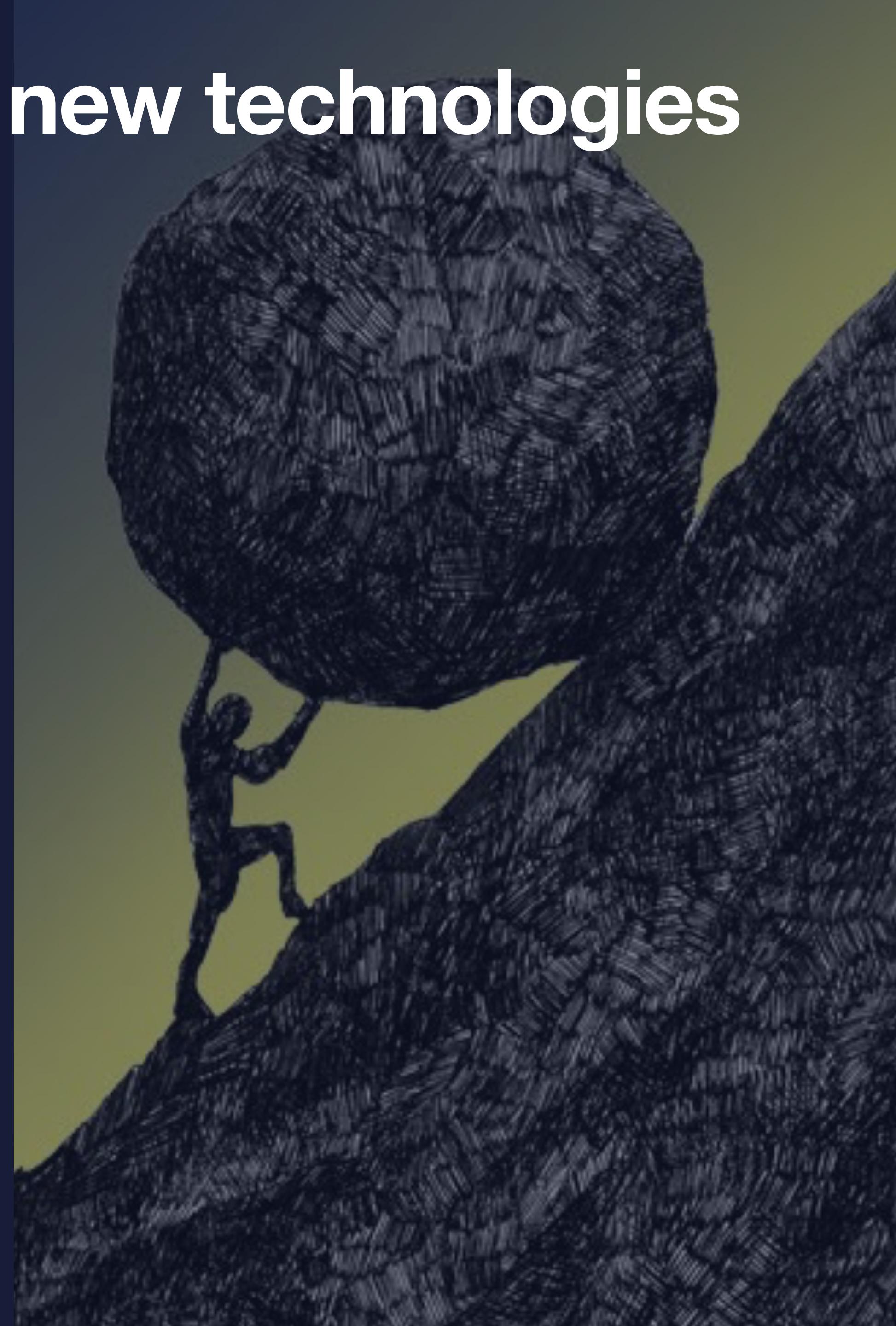
Preference for simple explanations

- Outcomes of collective human behavior are complex to understand.
- Preference for monocausal explanations (e.g. Lombrozo, 2016)



A general negative bias toward new technologies

- The transition to a system in which information circulates mostly through digital media is accompanied by a well-documented negativity bias toward new technologies (Orben, 2020).



The appeal of threat-related information

- Threat-related information warns people about possible dangers. The cost of ignoring such dangers (if real) is, on average, higher than the cost of taking them seriously. People have strong preferences for threat-related information (e.g. Blaine & Boyer, 2018).



Conclusion

- Concerns about misinformation are all-time high...
- ...but supporting evidence of abundance, effectiveness, and consequences is, at best mixed.
- Misinformation on misinformation may erode trust in media and misdirect resources.
- It is important to understand the reasons of the success of the current narrative, both from a methodological and cognitive perspective.



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