How and why does official information become misinformation? A typology of official misinformation

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ABSTRACT

It is important to widen the understanding of misinformation in different contexts. The findings of this qualitative study showed that official information can be misinformation. Official information, which is information concerning and/or coming from official services and processes, was studied with semi-structured interviews in two contexts in which support with information was needed. Four types of misinformation were found: outdated, conflicting, and incomplete information and perceived intimidation. Official information has characteristics related to structural factors, language, and terminology, as well as encounters that make it prone to misinformation. A typology of official misinformation was created to show the nuanced nature of misinformation and the different social, contextual, and situational factors surrounding misinformation. In-person support may be needed to tackle misinformation. Official information can be made clearer and more suited to different groups, which also diminishes the risk of misinformation.

1. Introduction

Misinformation is often seen as a problematic issue online and on social media (e.g., Allcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019; Calo, Coward, Spiro, Starbird, & West, 2021; Fernandez & Alani, 2018; Karduni et al., 2019). Misinformation research has focused on the diffusion, recognition, and correction of misinformation (e.g., Kumari, Ashok, Ghosal, & Ekbal, 2021; Qinyu, Sakura, & Li, 2021; Zhao, Da, & Yan, 2021). There are negative consequences of misinformation for both individuals and societies (Barua, Barua, Aktar, Kabir, & Li, 2020; Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020; Stahl, 2006). However, it is often treated solely as false and negative information that should be corrected without more clearly defining its nature (Jarrahi, Ma, & Goray, 2021; Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020).

Societies are built on official information (Hänninen, Karjalainen, & Lahti, 2005, p. 3), that is, information concerning and/or coming from official services and processes, which is often needed in changing and even challenging life situations. It is often considered trustworthy and accurate compared to information obtained from more informal sources (Huo & Li, 2019). However, making it publicly available does not guarantee access to it, which is affected by different factors, such as people's different literacies (Henninger, 2017).

2. Problem statement

Without understanding how and why official information may become misinformation, different authorities and official actors may unintentionally make it challenging for people to access and use vital official information, and authorities may even create and spread misinformation. Despite misinformation being a widely researched topic, most studies have not discussed precisely what misinformation is and what kind of role it plays in people's everyday information environments, of which official information is also a part. There is a lack of a broad and nuanced qualitative understanding of the phenomenon (Ruokolainen, 2022a).

To understand how and why official information becomes misinformation, two research questions were addressed:

1) What types of misinformation exist in the context of official services?
2) What characteristics of official information make it misinformation?

In addressing these research questions, a typology of official misinformation was created. The typology helps to understand misinformation as a nuanced phenomenon and to influence official information so that it becomes more accessible and reliable in different situations. A more nuanced understanding of misinformation as a concept helps

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prevent its negative consequences.

3. Literature review

3.1. Broad and nuanced understanding of misinformation

Misinformation is inaccurate, incomplete, vague, or ambiguous information in a certain situation and context, and various social, historical, and cultural factors affect how individuals and groups perceive information and its accuracy (Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020). Thus, misinformation can be considered a type of information, as information forms in social processes and does not essentially carry the notion of truth. This is possible when information is defined as *informative* (Buckland, 1991; Fox, 1983), and the truthfulness of information does not define how people perceive and use it (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Therefore, misinformation is not "a bastardised version of information that is considered the opposite of knowledge" (Jarrahi et al., 2021, p. 9).

Misinformation can be discussed in comparison with other types of information. Often, it is seen as accidentally false information, whereas *disinformation* refers to intentionally false or misleading information (Stahl, 2006). Some researchers have also distinguished *malinformation*, that is, accurate information shared or moved to cause harm, for example, private information made public (Baines & Elliott, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017a; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017b). Distinct from misinformation are also *misperceptions* (false beliefs) (Thorson, Sheble, & Southwell, 2018, p. 289). Although the distinctions and categorizations are indeed important, a more open approach was applied here. To find as much data on misinformation as possible, all types of information that were not indisputably or unambiguously accurate were considered of interest. The approach was to include, rather than exclude, various pieces of information, which were all referred to as *misinformation*, despite the controversy of the term. This is justified, as there is still a lack of qualitative research understanding misinformation holistically in people's lives (Ruokolainen, 2022a), and the categorizations in this context have yet to evolve.

3.2. Misinformation typologies

"Typologies descriptively differentiate aspects or characteristics of phenomenon or group," which do not necessarily aim to be exhaustive; rather, typologies may be completed by new categories and ideally should be applied in future empirical research (Fleming-May, 2008, pp. 41–42). Typologies may be indigenous, that is, created by the group studied, or analyst-constructed, in which the researcher identifies patterns that are unperceived by the group itself (Patton, 2002, pp. 454–460).

The increase in misinformation research in recent years has led to a growing number of typologies. For example, Wardle and colleagues (Wardle, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017b) identified seven types of misinformation and disinformation to understand information disorder: satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false content, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content. Some misinformation typologies have been connected to specific subjects and/ or fora, such as COVID-19-related misinformation (Bastani & Bahrami, 2020; Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020), vaccine misinformation on Twitter (Jamison et al., 2020), political misinformation (Machado, Kira, Narayanan, Kollanyi, & Howard, 2019), and crisis-related misinformation (Lu, 2020). There are several typologies of fake news as a type of misinformation (Ferreira, Robertson, & Kirsten, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2018; Toma & Scripcariu, 2020; Wang, Rao, & Sun, 2020). Many of these typologies are strongly connected to misinformation on the Internet or social media.

An attempt toward a more everyday approach to misinformation can be found in Ruokolainen and Widén (2020), who conducted a literature review on misinformation in the context of asylum seekers, refugees,

and immigrants and found six types of misinformation: official information that is incorrect, outdated information, misinformation via gatekeepers or intermediaries, misinformation giving false hope or unrealistic expectations, as well as rumors and distorted information.

3.3. Official information

Despite different societies largely relying on *official information* (Hänninen et al., 2005, p. 3), it and its characteristics are difficult to define. For example, based on public perception, Chauhan and Hughes (2017, p. 3151) defined official information in the context of online crisis information as "information whose source is perceived by the public as more authoritative and/or trustworthy". Huo and Li (2019) understood official information as a normative and trustworthy way to control rumors without stating how they defined the concept. Hänninen et al. (2005, p. 3) concluded that official information considering vulnerable groups generally aimed to represent official truth and was often distant, general, and constructed, not detailed, based on the experiences of the groups themselves, or reflective. The authors instead described *other information* to include precise information, tacit knowledge, counter knowledge, and weak knowledge. Thus, it seems easier to define the antonyms of official information than the term itself.

Related concepts are *government information* and *public sector information*, which Henninger (2017) defined as information provided by the government and public institutions, highlighting that public access to government information is not ensured by placing it online; accessibility is in practice more nuanced than the governmental understanding of it, and people often need different literacies to access governmental information. Official information can also be compared to expert knowledge and to the discussion on whose expertise is heard in society. Jakonen (2017, pp. 102–103) discussed expert knowledge indirectly by defining counter knowledge as information/knowledge formed in processes in which information and different views are compared to other information, facts, theories, and views. In these comparisons, official information was perceived as somewhat stiff and static, not flexible, or adaptive, and not necessarily as information that respects multiple views in society. Nevertheless, Jakonen (2017, p. 102) argued that mainstream information (currently accepted valid information) has often, at some point, been marginal or even critical. This would indicate that official information can also be considered changing.

Thus, official information can be considered through its status in society, sources, trustworthiness, or even truthfulness. A pressing issue is access or lack of access to it. Here, official information is defined as information that is either received from authorities and official services or about authorities, official services, or processes, such as immigration or rehabilitation processes. This definition is adopted because, in practice, people access and discuss the official information they need via different sources and with various people.

4. Method and data

4.1. Study contexts

The data were collected as part of a larger research project focusing on misinformation as a social phenomenon, more specifically in contexts where people need support with information (Ruokolainen, 2022a; Ruokolainen, 2022b; Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020), as is often the case in challenging life situations (e.g., Smith-Frigerio, 2021; Treiman et al., 2021). Support with information refers to broad and holistic actions that help people access, process, and use information. It does not merely involve mediating information, but various inclusive and respectful ways to encounter people can enhance their access to vital information (Ruokolainen, 2022b).

Two groups were interviewed: 1) volunteers working with asylum seekers and 2) youth service workers working with young people under 29 years of age. The study focused on these participants' experiences

with their clients. UNESCO (2020) considers both migrants and youth as disadvantaged, marginalized, or vulnerable groups, whose media and information literacy must be supported (see also Haider & Sundin, 2022, p. 82). Hence, misinformation can be even more problematic in these populations. Both groups need official information to navigate social structures. In Finland, where the study was conducted, asylum seekers and youth have clear support groups. Volunteers have become important support people and information sources for asylum seekers (Ruokolainen, 2022b; Jauhiainen, 2017, p. 9). Volunteering in the context of asylum seekers differs from traditional volunteering activities (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p. 3), as motives behind it are political, to help specifically asylum seekers (Ahonen & Kallius, 2019; Karakayali & Kleist, 2016), and volunteers cover core services (e.g., legal help), where society fails asylum seekers (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016). Based on European guidelines (European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, 2023b), Finnish youth are entitled to information and counseling services, which are important in assisting them with their information needs (European Youth Information and Counselling Agency, 2023a). The aim of the services is to promote "the integration into education and working life" (Siurala, 2018, p. 52).

4.2. Research design and approach

A semi-structured interview method was used, which consists of open-ended and targeted questions during relaxed discussions (Galletta & Cross, 2013, pp. 1–2, 45; O'Reilly & Dogra, 2018, p. 37). The overall topics of the interviews were misinformation and challenges with information, of which the participants were informed. However, these topics were not emphasized during the interviews, but misinformation was approached as a theme intertwined in everyday activities and not as a negative phenomenon but as openly and widely as possible. On a concrete level, the discussion touched upon varying themes, such as work in general, challenges at work, clients' needs, social networks, and emotions (see interview guides in Appendices 1 and 2). An organic combination of free discussion and gently probing questions functioned well in creating data on misinformation, which was found through both direct questions and indirect discussion (Ruokolainen, 2022a). The conversation topics were similar in both participant groups, with some contextual differences.

An indirect approach through people giving support was chosen for several reasons. First, this qualitative and holistic approach to misinformation is new, and there are no best practices to follow from earlier research. Second, both asylum seekers and youth may have several challenges with information, which can be overwhelming, and having a bigger picture of one's information environment in that situation can be difficult. Taking part in a study may also cause additional stress. As the focus of the study was not directly on the experiences of youth or asylum seekers but on misinformation in these limited contexts, people in intermediary positions were considered to be able to approach information phenomena from different angles and reflect upon the experiences of a wide clientele. Professionals working with different clients could provide more examples of misinformation than individual clients. However, this does not diminish the need to study misinformation more directly in the future.

4.3. Data collection

In September 2019–February 2020, seven volunteers working with asylum seekers were interviewed in six interviews, of which one was a pair interview. The participants were working with asylum seekers in non-governmental organizations (NGO), churches/parishes, or independently (activist–volunteers). The term volunteer was chosen to underline their engagement outside the official asylum system, but they are in fact, largely considered important actors in the asylum process (Jauhiainen, 2017, p. 9). They worked in two cities/towns in southern Finland with asylum applications and appeals, deportation, education,

employment, housing, and mental health, and some also with coordinating other volunteers. People volunteering only in recreational activities were excluded from the study. Some participants were contacted directly, and some were recruited through snowball sampling. The sample was small, since volunteers have quite tight circles, and the participants represent nearly all relevant organizations and actors in the chosen area. A small sample can be justified if the structure of the study is focused on narrow objectives (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and the participants have sufficient expertise in the subject (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986; see also Ruokolainen, 2022b). This study's design and participants met these criteria. One researcher conducted all interviews: three interviews in Finnish, two in Swedish, and one in English, and the interviews were 1 hour 49 minutes long on average. All interviews were conducted in person at the participants' workplaces, homes, or at the local university.

The second dataset, gathered in September–November 2021, consisted of 10 individual and three pair interviews with youth service workers (YSWs), 16 participants in total. The participants worked in different youth service organizations across southern Finland. The organizations were national, municipal, or NGOs that provided information, guidance, and counseling services mostly to youth between 15 and 29 years old. The services were free of charge and based on the voluntary participation of the clients. Some organizations and participants focused on all young people, while others focused more specifically on people with challenges with education, work, housing, or mental health issues. All organizations guided youth to the services they needed and aimed to prevent marginalization or further marginalization. The interviews were conducted on Zoom in Finnish by the same researcher as the first dataset and were, on average, 1 hour 28 minutes long.

4.4. Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed by external transcription services, and thematically coded and analyzed using NVivo software. The initial focus was on misinformation, and the six types of misinformation by Ruokolainen and Widén (2020) were used as a starting point in the data creation process and analysis. It was considered that misinformation related to official information, social networks, intermediaries, rumors, and emotions could be found, but the intention was not to verify these types or extend the preliminary typology but to openly study all kinds of misinformation. Hence, the analysis had traits of both data-driven and theory-driven analysis (Gibbs, 2007), with more emphasis on themes emerging from the data, which were revisited several times to form a firm basis for thematic coding. Eleven codes were created in the initial coding (Table 1). These codes were partly broader, some narrower, not necessarily on the same levels, and overlapping. After many iterations, the importance of the overall theme of official information emerged from the data. After this, some codes were dismissed, combined, and/or renamed. During the last rounds of coding, three additional codes were created (Table 2). The types of official

Table 1

First coding scheme based on the data-driven approach.

Codes	Number of interviews	References
Factors surrounding misinformation	19	159
Misunderstandings and misconceptions	18	91
Official information	17	58
Sharing misinformation	16	38
Misinformation connected to complicated circumstances	13	34
False hope and unrealistic expectations	13	25
Conflicting and ambiguous information	12	26
Rumors and distorted information	10	34
Outdated information	10	17
Intimidation	6	21
Gatekeepers and intermediaries	6	16

Table 2
New codes connected to official misinformation.

Codes	Number of interviews	References
Language and terminology	16	33
Encounters with authorities	13	50
Incomplete information	11	24

misinformation and characteristics presented in this study are combinations of different codes of the initial coding, and a large part of the types and characteristics were initially included in the code of *official information*. Approximately the same amount of data on misinformation was found in both datasets, although the samples were of different sizes.

5. Findings

In the context of asylum seekers, the sources of official information were especially the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) and the police, but also reception centers and lawyers. Common topics of official misinformation involved the asylum process, residence permits, being or becoming undocumented, the right to work, and reception services. Youth received official information from the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela), employment services, and health, mental health, and substance abuse services. Topics of official misinformation included different social benefits, local government pilots on employment, health services, and different societal processes. Some participants also mentioned misinformation connected with compulsory education, social services, and youth services.

First, four types of misinformation were identified: outdated, conflicting, and incomplete information and perceived intimidation. Second, based on these types, three inherent characteristics involved in official information being or becoming misinformation were identified.

5.1. Types of misinformation

5.1.1. Outdated information
In both contexts, outdated information was mostly official information that had changed, but people continued to use the old information. Volunteers referred to changes in the asylum system, legislation, and practices: *"You think that you know how something works, but then the law has already changed"* (Volunteer Sofia). Concretely, outdated information was related, for example, to the right to work: *"Is it now three or six months? It has changed. Migri gave an answer to a person, and it was just incomprehensible. Does this person have a right to work or not?"* (Volunteer Marianne). This excerpt also highlights the unclarity of official information.

YSWs mentioned their own confusion with changing services, such as health services:

> Then this person asks me how to do it [make an appointment], and I have to Google what the number is this week. The services keep changing quite quickly, so even a professional has a hard time keeping up with the practices. (YSW Karri).

Several YSWs brought up temporary projects in the field of youth services. They mentioned individual actors, such as guidance counselors, passing on outdated information to the youth. This information had to be corrected elsewhere and the issue of outdated information continued to spread.

5.1.2. Conflicting information
Both groups noticed conflicting information received from different actors:

> I can call three different lawyers and ask what to do. The first one has one opinion and the second one another. They can be conflicting, but then I can call the third one. (Volunteer Sara).

This young person said that they had made it [the CV] with a career coach. I could not say that I would never have given you this kind of advice. I could see the reaction in them, like they've done it with a career coach, and here I am, giving them completely different advice. (YSW Milja).

Conflicting information influenced interaction with clients*: "You have to be careful not to give an absolute answer"* and *"We try to give as accurate information as possible"* (Volunteer Emma). Thus, participants understood that information was not always only accurate and inaccurate but more nuanced.

Acting based on conflicting information was not easy:

> Many people with an alcohol or drug history have a question of whether one should tell them about the substance use when seeking mental help. This can make it much more difficult to get therapy or some social benefits. I would like to say that it's not true, that, of course, you should be honest, but luckily, I don't have to say anything. Honestly, I don't know what I would do if I had to say something. I think this impression is correct; you shouldn't be honest. (YSW Katja).

Conflicting information gave contradictory impressions. Many YSWs discussed the pressure youth felt and what was expected of them. However, when the youth needed help changing their lives, help was hard to get or even denied. This could lead to challenges in communication on all sides, as Nea and Sanna explained together:

> And when the young person is motivated to seek help and finally gets contact with the health services, and when the discussion starts, it comes out that the appointments are once a month or every other month. And then, the one phone call has been canceled and postponed by a month. Then, the young person says they don't get anything out of it and rather stop going. (YSW Nea).

> The health services interpret this in the way that the young person is not committed to treatment. (YSW Sanna).

Similarly, the conflicting information asylum seekers gave influenced asylum decisions or was even used against them.

> You can clearly see that they [Migri] are looking for inconsistencies. They pounce on things like, hey, you told us that you were home when that man came to meet you and your father the first time. But here you say that you were elsewhere when he came. And it might have been that the man had visited them twice, but you mixed up those times. But this can be interpreted in the way that they [Migri] seek these kinds of things so that they can say that first you said this and now this, and the whole story becomes incredible. (Volunteer Emma).

Thus, conflicting information seems to reveal the credibility of the person giving the information. Interestingly, these findings showed that conflicting information was quite common, a natural part of people's information practices, and even rooted in official structures. However, in the context of these two groups, it acted against them.

5.1.3. Incomplete information
Incomplete information refers to information in which some aspects of the content are left out, and a distorted picture may be formed. The participants provided several concrete examples of themes in which incomplete information had occurred. Volunteers mentioned being or becoming undocumented, the right to work, temporary personal ID, Migri and its role, and the obligation of confidentiality. YSWs referred to mental health services, including ward care, different obligations and rights related to services, services in general, preparatory education for vocational training, Kela forms and attachments, and vocational rehabilitation.

Different services were mentioned, and YSWs, especially, were concerned that there was not enough detailed information about

services that helped young people understand them.

> If I tell them "it would be good to admit yourself to a mental hospital", they don't understand what it means. You have to explain what it means. But if you try to Google what a hospital stay means, what it entails, and how people benefit from it, there is no such information. (YSW Karri).

Instructions provided by services can be incomplete information. Phrases such as *"book an appointment at the healthcare center"* (YSW Karri) or *"register as a job seeker"* (YSW Milja) are not detailed enough to tell youth what to do concretely. YSWs found it problematic that youth were not explicitly told *why* they should perform certain, sometimes seemingly arbitrary, tasks.

Much of the incomplete information was considered natural and understandable, but some participants had more negative attitudes. Not having all the information available could give the impression that people were not welcome:

> I would just want to know how everything works, like there could be a manual. … But this information is not easily available. It seems that there is no true interest in having it easily available, either. What if we had another kind of attitude in society? Now, it seems that the current attitude is that we should be an inhospitable country. We should attract no one; we should not make it easy. (Volunteer Marianne).

Some YSWs mentioned that young people gave incomplete information in some situations, which negatively affected other situations:

> A young person does not always bring up that they have a diagnosis. It could affect employment or education, but they don't always think that it could be important. (YSW Eva).

However, leaving out details was also justified, as Katja explained in the previous section, in stating that young people did not necessarily want to reveal their substance abuse history in mental health services.

5.1.4. Perceived intimidation

Perceived intimidation happens when inaccurate or inadequate information is presented in an unfriendly or even hostile way, so that it shapes the understanding of the message. Both the volunteers and YSWs connected perceived intimidation only to the authorities. Perceived intimidation differed from other inaccurate official information, since the motives behind providing this information were considered malicious, or at the very least indifferent, by the participants and possibly their clients. Therefore, perceived intimidation can also be classified as disinformation.

Volunteers described perceived intimidation in encounters with the police, especially:

> For example, when giving the negative decision, the police can say now you're illegally in this country, and you don't have any alternatives other than to go home. And they are not the ones who make the decision about residence permits based on, let's say, studies. They can say, "Do you believe that you can get it if you're in a vocational school? That's not possible." And it is. But if the police say so, of course, this person thinks like shit, this was my last chance. (Volunteer Sofia).

> I don't know why this police person or this Migri person has to emphasize the bad things. They are like, there is a risk that your client will be removed from this country before the decision to this permit comes, because this decision is usually applied from abroad. Is he or she aware? Tell your friend that he or she can wait in the home country. And I'm like, that's not accurate. Because if you say this, which is true, you also have to say, it's also true that in these cases, the court usually stops the deportation. (Volunteer Mia).

Perceived intimidation was more clearly present in the volunteers'

interviews, but some YSWs associated it with health services, such as a potential encounter between a depressed young person and a psychiatrist:

> A psychiatrist states that you are not depressed because you have washed your hair, you've taken a shower. Or, just get a grip on yourself. Or they tell a severely depressed and anxious person that they won't give them any sick leave because it would passivate them more. These kinds of encounters are very damaging. Think about going to a specialist and being full of hope that you'll get some help after such a long time. Then you meet a person who invalidates, humiliates you, or maybe says the same things your bullies have said. Building trust again with that place is really difficult. (YSW Katja).

5.2. Characteristics of official information

5.2.1. Structural factors

Much misinformation was related to many official services and legal processes being complicated and bureaucratic; therefore, misinformation was formed and integrated into the structures. The clearest examples were discretionary benefits and services that themselves involved interpretation, causing, for example, conflicting information. With all the changing practices and interpretations of the law (Ahonen & Kallius, 2019; Pirjatanniemi et al., 2021), the asylum system involves much interpretation and uncertainty.

> For example, two years ago, everybody was making applications after the administrative court negative, for many reasons. I had a feeling that many people thought this was the good thing to do. Like, it's true that you can do it. Sometimes, it is a good thing to do. But the process is so complicated, and every case is so different, and there are so many pros and cons to weigh and counterweigh. People may think that my friend did a new application, so I will do it, too. (Volunteer Mia).

Volunteer Sofia, referring to the common assumption in society of people misusing welfare systems, stated that asylum seekers were often not capable of misusing the system because it was too complicated to understand: *"You could notice it [the unawareness of the system] in the comments people would give to one another: 'you speak so good English, you're for sure getting asylum' or 'you're an engineer, you will get asylum'."* Thus, misunderstanding the system may also lead to sharing misinformation with others.

Complicated systems and services were a concern among the YSWs:

> It's a real jungle with the services. People mix up Kela with social services, and the same goes for employment services and local government pilots on employment. Where to get health services has also changed. The system you've got used to has changed, so don't be lulled into thinking that things remain the same. (YSW Eva).

Some YSWs considered it understandable that there was unclear and incomplete official information:

> You start to understand the reason why those people [at Kela] say something in this way. They don't want to keep you in the dark, but they don't dare to say that this thing is exactly like this, and then it goes in a completely different way the following day. (YSW Elias).

Both participant groups used themselves as a comparison in structural matters, if they had trouble understanding some structures and terminology, they wondered how their clients could comprehend such issues. Official information was structurally complicated for end users, and in the case of marginalized groups in particular, it may be nearly impossible to understand.

5.2.2. Language and terminology

Both participant groups recognized issues with language and terminology connected to official processes. YSWs especially discussed

bureaucratic language and how it hindered understanding:

> The vocabulary may be difficult, and it [the Kela decision] may be written in officialese. You yourself have to read syllable by syllable what it says. (YSW Helena).

Volunteer Sara mentioned lawyers using legal language, which the clients did not understand. Participants and their clients mixed up concepts such as "vocational rehabilitation" and "internship" (YSW Milja).

Both groups recognized their clients as having their own ways of using language, and they acted as interpreters between authorities and clients. With volunteers, this was connected concretely to different languages and ways of speaking the local language, whereas the YSWs discussed youth language:

> If you go and read Kela's web pages, it's professional language. Then we have young people who speak youth language or street language, so there is little common ground for mutual understanding. (YSW Sami).

In addition to language gaps that do not enhance communication and positive encounters, language is connected to inequality:

> It's very uneven. If you ask someone if their lawyer knows, they say, yes, I told them directly. It depends much on their Finnish skills. They can communicate also well with us, but then there are these people who practically don't know any Finnish and have a really hard time getting things done. (Volunteer Maija).

5.2.3. Encounters with authorities

The importance of positive human encounters was emphasized in both datasets, whereas negative encounters were considered very damaging. An encounter is an interaction between a client and a professional, and due to these roles, the encounter parties are often in asymmetric positions where the professional has more responsibility for the encounter (Sundström, 2008, p. 13). Both participant groups were aware of human communication, different social realities (between the clients and authorities), and differing expectations causing clashes:

> We are humans in communication. … It can happen at any time that somebody will misunderstand. Or there are different realities, social realities, so it is absolutely understandable. This is why it is so unnatural to explain every single detail. (Volunteer Mia).

The participants felt that positive encounters were based on building relationships and trust and giving enough time for the encounter. These goals were not met in negative encounters with the authorities. Perceived intimidation was the clearest example of the impact of negative encounters on misinformation, and they comprised invalidation and humiliation. However, other kinds of encounters also diminished trust:

> If you meet a social worker once a month, you don't form that kind of relationship. And every time, there is a different interpreter present. (Volunteer Emma).

> Has the young person been pushed around. … Has the young person had a feeling that they are listened to and understood and trusted. (YSW Ossi).

Encounters are connected to attitudes and conceptions. Negative encounters, or the fear of them, could cause clients to react to and/or form negative attitudes toward authorities, which again made the situations worse, as YSWs Nea and Sanna explained in Section 5.1.2.

At its worst, negative encounters were part of the system:

> If we talk about the service system, there is a certain arbitrariness and power. … [There is] dismissal, exercise of power, bureaucracy, not encountering people. (YSW Katja).

6. Discussion

6.1. Misinformation and official information

Returning to the research questions, the findings showed that 1) there are at least four types of misinformation in the context of official services, and 2) official information possesses characteristics connected to structures, language, and encounters that make it misinformation. Based on the findings, misinformation is related to social factors, context, and situation. Outdated information is *false* and problematic because it is used at the wrong time. Conflicting information is related to the lack of consistently easy and indisputable answers in societal processes. Incomplete information does not have to be completely false, only one-sided or insufficient, but it may give an impression that leads to incorrect conclusions. Perceived intimidation is associated with negative encounters that form impressions about services and official actors, and it may be incorrect information that is also shared in a hostile way.

The findings align with Karlova and Fisher (2013) definition of misinformation as inaccurate, incomplete, vague, or ambiguous information affected by various social factors. Misinformation forms in social situations, interactions, and encounters. The findings also illustrate the nuanced nature of misinformation; it is not absolutely and unchangingly false in all situations and times, and sometimes official information is understandably misinformation. Studying misinformation in the context of official information scratched the surface of the nuanced nature of misinformation, but the findings clearly indicate that misinformation is not only bad or bastardized information (Jarrahi et al., 2021) that can and should always be avoided. Rather, misinformation can be considered an unavoidable part of one's information environment, even in the case of official information. Misinformation also relates to trust, as well as feeling encountered, respected, and included, and it is not a detachable entity of all the information and social phenomena surrounding people's everyday lives.

The findings show that official information has characteristics that make it inherently prone to misinformation. Changing structures create at least outdated information, whereas the interpretation of legislation and practices is involved in conflicting and incomplete information. Complicated language and terminology make it difficult to access information, which can also otherwise be problematic or confusing for clients. Bureaucratic terminology may lead to misunderstandings, which are further shared with others as misinformation. Dealing with official information often involves various encounters with authorities and is not always considered positive by clients. Negative encounters most directly connect to perceived intimidation, but they also otherwise diminish trust and may create misunderstandings and misperceptions. These characteristics of official information increase the risk of misinformation.

The lack of a unified definition of official information makes it difficult to compare these findings to earlier research. Official information has been described as trustworthy (Chauhan & Hughes, 2017; Huo & Li, 2019) or representing truth in some matter (Hänninen et al., 2005), as difficult to access (Henninger, 2017) and distant (Hänninen et al., 2005), as well as stiff and static (Jakonen, 2017). These characteristics alone are simplifications of the phenomenon. The purpose here is not to have an exhaustive answer to the nature of official information but to consider characteristics related to misinformation. Language and terminology make it distant and difficult to access, even stiff and static. Complicated structures, however, also make official information changing and imprecise. Official information seems to be like any other information, possessing several even contradictory characteristics. Official information cannot be simplified by calling it trustworthy or truthful in all situations. To answer the overall question of how and why official information becomes misinformation, it can be concluded that official information is as any information; characteristically prone to and can be or become misinformation through unintentional, negligent, or deliberate actions, depending on various social and contextual

factors.

6.2. Typology of official misinformation

Although the increased number of misinformation typologies indicates an interest in expanding the understanding of misinformation, misinformation is still often used somewhat generally and vaguely without further clarification and is mainly understood as problematic information online. There is a need for a broader understanding of the concept. To address this issue of conceptual vagueness, a typology of official misinformation was proposed (see Table 3).

The typology was based on data on official information, and the types were analyst-constructed (Patton, 2002). The types of misinformation in the context of asylum seekers, immigrants, and refugees by Ruokolainen and Widén (2020) were used as a starting point to compose preliminary outlines for data collection and analysis, but the aim was not to verify these types or limit the study to them. The data-driven approach showed that official misinformation, one of the Ruokolainen and Widén (2020) types, was significant in the context of youth and asylum seekers and needed further analysis. The typology of official misinformation considered the characteristics of official information, which showed that official information is as any information, sometimes reliable and sometimes vague or inappropriate in some situation or for some people. Misinformation, again, is information that cannot be merely considered false or problematic.

The types overlap, as the same pieces of information may be considered different types of official misinformation. The typology is not exhaustive and may and should be extended. Nevertheless, the typology helps to study what kind of misinformation people encounter in their everyday information environment. Although the typology focused on official information and considered its characteristics, it may function as an inspiration for future misinformation typologies and studies that study misinformation from the information receiver's point of view. For example, work-related misinformation or misinformation in everyday encounters can be studied with the help of it.

6.3. Theoretical and practical implications

As the current study is one of the few to study misinformation qualitatively (Ruokolainen, 2022a), with the aim of understanding its nature in more nuance, the findings have a true contribution to library and information science research. Instead of normatively testing whether people recognize misinformation or why people rely on it (e.g., Kumari et al., 2021; Qinyu et al., 2021), there is a need to understand misinformation more holistically: What is misinformation in different contexts? What kind of misinformation do people encounter in their natural information environment? How do people perceive information and misinformation? (see also Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020). Misinformation is not solely connected to fake news, health-related information, or politics, nor is it only present on the internet.

Similar findings in the two different contexts strengthened the findings; misinformation associated with official information was surprisingly similar in both datasets. This indicates that official information can also be misinformation in other contexts. Hence, the findings help consider official information and its accuracy and availability in different contexts. It is important that the providers of official information become aware of how and why their information can be misinformation; thus, it is difficult to use. Official information can be made clearer and available in the best way for different recipients.

It seems that some people or groups may need face-to-face encounters to truly have access to information and to combat different problems with official information, which is important considering their social inclusion. The role of intermediaries and support people could be strengthened to reach this aim. People also need more tailor-made information services, where the focus is not solely on providing information but on discussing it.

6.4. Limitations

Qualitative research involves interpretation and subjectivity (Peshkin, 2000), and alternative interpretations of the findings could have been made. The curious approach to misinformation as a wide concept affected the findings, which should be considered indicative, as there is

Table 3
Typology of official misinformation

Official information			
Characteristics	**Structural factors** Complicated and bureaucratic structures create different types of misinformation. This has to do with, for example, discretionary benefits, systems, or services and changing legislation or practices. Misinformation derives also from misunderstanding some structures.	**Language and terminology** Issues with language hinder understanding between different parties. Official language may obscure the content of official information. Clients' language skills are connected to their ability to use services and obtain information.	**Encounters with authorities** Poor quality interaction between an authority and a client causes misunderstandings and even misinformation. Negative encounters diminish trust and shape clients' attitudes to authorities.
Types of misinformation	**Outdated information** There are changes in legislation, practices, or services, which also involves changes in information. However, old information may still be used as accurate information.	**Conflicting information** Official information is not always unambiguous, and people may receive different information and advice concerning complicated structures. Some encounters or correspondence with authorities may also give a contradictory impression of some matter.	**Incomplete information** Some content of official information is left out or the information is not detailed enough. Often this information relates to rights, services, benefits, or official organizations and their roles. Incomplete information may shape the clients' perceptions and make them misunderstand some information.	**Perceived intimidation** Authorities present accurate or inaccurate information in an unfriendly or hostile way, which may shape the content of the message. This happens, for example, in encounters with immigration services, the police, or health services.

little preceding qualitative research on misinformation, related to official information, especially. Future research may elaborate on the findings and find clearer borders between different types of information and misinformation.

The indirect approach through volunteers and YSWs made it possible to discuss misinformation broadly, despite it being a very difficult topic to reach in qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, the findings do not indicate the thoughts of asylum seekers or youth. The data focused on misinformation and related aspects; therefore, negative aspects were often emphasized in this study. The participants also reported good information flow, encounters, and misinformation connected to contexts other than official information, which unfortunately did not fit in this study. Nevertheless, problems with official information formed a large part of the data.

7. Conclusions

Official information is vital for people to be able to function in society. However, official information may be misinformation, which may be derived from official structures, language, and negative encounters. Therefore, having ostensible access to information is not sufficient. As societal processes are complex, it is crucial to inspect information about different services and processes to develop them so that different people in society can truly access and understand that information. With the help of the official misinformation typology, which shows the nuanced ways in which official misinformation may be misinformation, different authorities can make information clearer and provide in-person support suitable for different client groups. This also involves adopting respectful and inclusive practices that diminish the impact of negative encounters that contribute to misinformation. A wider understanding of misinformation, to which the typology contributes, helps to study the phenomenon thoroughly and to find different risks misinformation may pose. Further misinformation typologies in different contexts, not merely in online environments, are needed. There is also a need for a more person-centered approach to misinformation, which does not involve only controversial topics. The typology is an attempt to steer misinformation research to understand misinformation as a natural part of people's everyday information environment. This would also make people's own perceptions of information better heard and valued.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2023.101237.

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