

Title: Do differences in how researchers define misinformation explain differences in opinions across disciplines? appendix for “A survey of expert views on misinformation: Definitions, determinants, solutions, and future of the field”

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Note: The material contained herein is supplementary to the article named in the title and published in the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review.

Appendix F: Do differences in how researchers define misinformation explain differences in opinions across disciplines?

We do not formally test whether all differences in opinions across methods and disciplines can be explained by differences in definitions of misinformation. Instead, we focus on one of the most polarizing questions in the survey: whether misinformation played a decisive role in the outcome of the 2016 US election. It is a particularly interesting case because (i) psychologists and political scientists had diverging views on the role of misinformation in the 2016 election, and (ii) they also had diverging views on what constitutes misinformation. Finally, there are good reasons to expect that these differences in definitions of misinformation could cause differences in opinions about the 2016 election. Psychologists had much broader definitions of misinformation, including, for instance, hyperpartisan news, while political scientists had much more conservative definitions, excluding hyperpartisan news. Given the importance of partisan news in elections, it is possible that psychologists answered the questions about the influence of misinformation on the election thinking about hyperpartisan news, while political scientists did not.

First, a linear regression on the full dataset showed that agreeing that misinformation played a decisive outcome in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was associated with agreeing that hyperpartisan news is misinformation ($b = .36, p < .001$). This effect becomes non-significant ($b = .15, p = .09$) when adding experts' disciplines as a predictor in the model (difference between psychologists and political scientists: $b = 1.58, p < .001$).

Second, we formally investigated whether differences in definitions of misinformation mediate the difference in opinions about the influence of misinformation among psychologists and political scientists. To do so, we restrict the data set to only responses from psychologists and political scientists. We find no evidence of mediation. Discipline had a direct effect on opinions about the influence of misinformation ($ADE = 1.66, p < .001$), but differences in definitions of misinformation only mediated 3% of this effect ($p = .79$).

However, in addition to the important limitations of mediation analyses, it should be noted that our sample size is very small (22 political scientists and 29 psychologists). Thus, these results should thus not be taken as evidence that how experts define misinformation does not influence their views about misinformation. We felt compelled to add this section because the results reported in the main text lend themselves to the interpretation that such mediation exists. Ultimately, we believe that our results are inconclusive on the existence of mediation.