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# Constructing Online Disinformation and Misinformation in Norway

The discourse of causes, imaginaries of futures and interpretations of solutions

Masteroppgave i Studier av kunnskap, teknologi og samfunn (STS)

Veileder: Govert Valkenburg

Medveileder: Thomas Berker

Mai 2021



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Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet  
Det humanistiske fakultet  
Institutt for tverrfaglige kulturstudier



**NTNU**

Kunnskap for en bedre verden



## Læringsmål – Master i Studier av kunnskap, teknologi og samfunn (STS)

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- utføre avansert kunnskapsmekling i forbindelse med tverrfaglige prosjekter og prosesser

# Summary

The problem of online disinformation and misinformation has gained attention in the Norwegian media and public debate following events abroad. In this thesis I analyze the construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway by actors in Norwegian society. I investigate how actors construct causes of, imagine futures with and propose solutions to the issue. The data for this investigation is sourced from available articles, reports and websites. Discourse analysis is used to reveal how actors construct causes. The theory of sociotechnical imaginaries assist in illuminating the normative concerns the actors have. To analyze the actors' flexible interpretations for how to solve online disinformation and misinformation in Norway, the social construction of technology (SCOT) framework is applied. This thesis finds that the social causes perceived are primarily political motives, and to a lesser extent economic motives, the situation of crisis and emotions. The technical causes the actors blame are the internet and social media, as well as associated properties such as algorithms, lack of editorial filters and tools to target specific users. The sociotechnical imaginaries of the actors are dominated by a concern for trust in society, in the form of social trust, political trust, trust in news and trust in authorities. Some actors believe diminished trust could harm democracy, while others fear disinformation will influence elections. For solving the problem, hermeneutic solutions seek to encourage and raise critical media awareness, inform the public of the problem and maintain strong and independent news media. Platform solutions function to moderate content and supplement it with fact-checks and trustworthy sources. Trust emerges as a counterpoint to online disinformation and misinformation in Norway as it is the value perceived to be most threatened, it is required for solutions to be effective and it is a condition for sustaining society's resilience. Finally, I explain how the problem also represents a scandal of authenticity.

# Sammendrag

Problemet med desinformasjon og feilinformasjon på nett har fått oppmerksomhet i norske medier og samfunnsdebatten som følge av hendelser i utlandet. I denne oppgaven analyserer jeg norske aktørers konstruksjon av desinformasjon og feilinformasjon på nett i Norge. Jeg utforsker hvordan aktører konstruerer årsaker til, forestiller seg fremtider med og foreslår løsninger på problemet. Materialet som utforskes er funnet i tilgjengelige artikler, rapporter og nettsider. Diskursanalyse er brukt til å finne ut hvordan aktører konstruerer årsaker. Teorien om sosiotekniske forestillinger bidrar til å belyse normative bekymringer aktørene har. For å analysere aktørenes fleksible tolkninger for hvordan desinformasjon og feilinformasjon på nett i Norge, blir det teoretiske rammeverket for sosial konstruksjon av teknologi (SCOT) anvendt. Denne oppgaven finner at oppfatningen av sosiale årsaker primært dreier seg om politiske motiv, og i noe mindre grad økonomiske motiver, samt krisesituasjoner og følelser. De tekniske årsakene aktørene skylder på er internett og sosiale medier, samt tilhørende egenskaper som algoritmer, mangel på redaktør-filter og verktøy for å målrette budskap til spesifikke brukere. Aktørenes sosiotekniske forestillinger domineres av bekymring for tilliten i samfunnet, i form av sosial tillit, politisk tillit, tillit til medier og tillit til myndighetene. Enkelte aktører tror svekket tillit kan ramme demokratiet, mens andre frykter desinformasjon kan påvirke valg. For å løse problemet vil hermeneutiske løsninger oppfordre til og øke kritisk medieforståelse, informere offentligheten om problemet og tilrettelegge for sterke og uavhengige nyhetsmedier. Plattform-løsninger fungerer ved å moderere innhold og supplere det med faktasjekker og troverdige kilder. Tillit fremtrer til slutt som en motpol til desinformasjon og feilinformasjon på nett i Norge ettersom det er den verdien som oppleves mest truet, den er nødvendig for at løsningene skal være effektive og den er en betingelse for å ivareta samfunnets motstandsdyktighet. Til slutt forklarer jeg hvordan problemet også representerer en autenticitets-skandale.

# Acknowledgements

In terms familiar to any STS'er; this thesis is socially constructed. This does not mean it is any less 'real' or materialized — you are looking at it now. It means that even though I typed it on my computer, the result is fundamentally contingent on the social relations which have enveloped me and my work. Nature is part of these social relations too, as several of the conclusions in this thesis were reached while venturing in it. However, the classification of nature as something we can enter and exit is itself perhaps the ultimate social construction.

The topic was chosen as a matter which demonstrates the malleability of sociotechnical processes. The potential dangers posed by online disinformation and misinformation accentuates the need to impose our society's values on these processes, although this is as important in seemingly mundane contexts. Science and technology are always situated and cultural.

Special thanks to Govert Valkenburg and Thomas Berker, my supervisors, for constructive and engaging discussions as well as unwavering support throughout the past year in Trondheim's cyberspace.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The aim of this thesis

On the 14th of February 2020, the Minister of Culture and Equality, Abid Q. Raja, presented the 18 members of the new Committee for the freedom of speech<sup>1</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020a). This committee is tasked with investigating the social, technological, legal and economic conditions for the right to expression in Norway. The previous committee ended their work in 1999, and digitization plays a large part in the mandate's justification: «Digitization has fundamentally changed the conditions for freedom of speech»<sup>2</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b).

In the debate article *Committee for the freedom of speech void of technology-competency*<sup>3</sup>, SINTEF researcher Petter Bae Brandtzæg (2020) asks why none of all the 18 members of the committee have special competency on technology. He believes the composition of members — «educators, literary scholars, lawyers, editors and journalists and writers»<sup>4</sup> — are unreflective of the technological challenges explained in the mandate. The committee's investigation is to result in a Norwegian Official Report (NOU) by the 1st of March 2022 (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b). In it they will recommend measures to deal with the challenges facing freedom of speech today — including the increased spread of disinformation.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze Norwegian society's response to online disinformation and misinformation. As I will show, the problem has grown in recent years and could threaten democracy and the health of citizens. Deliberate measures by actors in Norwegian society are required to successfully mitigate the challenge. These measures should reflect the actors' understanding of the problem and how it relates to their ambitions for the future. This thesis' aim is therefore to answer:

- How is online disinformation and misinformation in Norway being constructed by actors in Norwegian society?

Using selected texts by 17 different actors in Norwegian society as material, I analyze discursive constructs of online disinformation and misinformation to uncover and discuss understandings of causes, imaginaries of futures and potential solutions. In this introduction I will first give an account of how the problem has emerged and been discussed in the public debate. I then describe how previous research has attempted to conceptualize the problem and its conditions. This leads me to my research questions which will help fulfill this thesis' aim. I end the introduction by going over the theories, methods and conclusions of the thesis as a whole.

## 1.2 The public conversation of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway

Online disinformation and misinformation have in the past couple of years emerged as a serious challenge for societies to resolve. In Norway, media audiences became familiar with it when leading Norwegian newspapers wrote of the online misinformation, and disinformation campaigns, surrounding the 2016 and, later on, the 2020 US-elections. An article in VG

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<sup>1</sup> My translation from original: Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen

<sup>2</sup> «Digitaliseringen har endret forutsetningene for ytringsfriheten fundamentalt»

<sup>3</sup> *Ytringsfrihetskommisjon uten teknologikompetanse*

<sup>4</sup> «pedagoger, litteraturvitere, jurister, avisredaktører og journalister og skribenter»

reported of the «Pizzagate» incident where an armed, 28-year old man went searching for a deep state pedophile ring (Mortensen, 2016). He had read about this conspiracy online. A story in Aftenposten was of the Russian propaganda campaigns buying Facebook-ads to target voters with fear-invoking and polarizing messages (NTB, 2017). Facebook estimated that the advertisements had potentially reached 126 million users. In the wake of the 2020 election, we have read (and watched) in horror, on for example NRK, of the January 6th storming of the US Capitol (Jentoft & Kolberg, 2021). The attack, which resulted in five deaths, is by some (Pletten, 2021; Strand, 2021) seen as the culmination of months of ongoing accusations of a stolen election — an unfounded claim trumpeted (pun intended) by the former president himself.

While taking place at great geographical and cultural distance, the occurrences brought attention to the issue and to how it may be affecting Norwegian society too. The leading fact-checking site in Norway, Faktisk.no, was established in 2017 by the newspapers VG and Dagbladet, who were later joined in ownership by Public Service Broadcaster NRK, as well as TV2, Amedia and Polaris Media (Faktisk.no, nd.). The chief editor, Kristoffer Egeberg, pointed out when interviewed for a podcast that Norway has in fact suffered the most tragic consequences of the spread of online disinformation already — the 22nd of July terrorist attack in 2011 (Revaa, 2020). Still, he points out, the awareness of this aspect has been lacking: «That it did not dawn on us already then, that's something I feel a bit of shame for. But it is something the whole society should be ashamed of. Because we see changes in terms of disinformation, especially on social media in Norway, that we haven't sufficiently kept track of, and that we haven't taken seriously»<sup>5</sup> (Revaa, 2020).

Faktisk.no investigates dubious claims and topics where the facts are disputed, often focusing on statements made on social media platforms. One recent article of theirs discusses a Facebook-post with 1200 shares, claiming the COVID-19 pandemic is a hoax and that the Government are criminals (Skiphamn & Akerbæk, 2021). It is mentioned that the person who wrote the post has previously argued that the earth is flat. Faktisk has examined the factual claims and their article has been linked to by Facebook below the post (Paaske, 2021). In November 2020 Faktisk.no published an extensive article on the Norwegian manifestations of the QAnon movement (Dahlbeck, 2020). This movement builds on a conspiracy theory about a secret elite — consisting of democrats, bureaucrats and liberal celebrities — that exercises ritual sacrifice of children and control the world. Posts with QAnon-related tags have cumulatively collected close to 100 000 reactions, i.e. likes, comments and shares, in Norway. The biggest QAnon Facebook group in Norway, InitateØ NESARA NORGE, has about 2700 members. The posts attracting most attention in this group are about how vaccines are dangerous and why one should be against the COVID-19 lockdown and masks. Among the top 20 engaging posts is also one about the elite sacrificing children under satanic rituals in order to extract a hormone which would keep them young.

The spread of misinformation and disinformation in Norway however isn't limited to social media platforms medium-wise and extreme conspiracy theories content-wise. NRK's department for technology and media, NRKbeta, discovered that large Norwegian news media had accidentally used fake Russian Twitter bot accounts as sources for their own news articles (Grut, 2020). These were ABC Nyheter, Aftenposten, Dagbladet, Nettavisen, NRK, Side 2, TV2 and VG. Dagbladet had for instance cited a Twitter account as an opinion from a citizen ahead of the French presidential elections in 2017. In the aftermath of a terrorattack in Paris, user @pamela\_moore13 commented that the majority of the French police had already planned to

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<sup>5</sup> «Det at det ikke slo oss allerede den gangen, det skammer jeg meg litt over. Men det er jo noe hele samfunnet må skamme seg over. For vi ser en utvikling i forhold til desinformasjon, spesielt på sosiale medier i Norge, som vi ikke har fulgt godt nok med på, og som vi ikke har tatt på alvor»

vote for presidential candidate Le Pen. The accounts were later banned on Twitter for allegedly being controlled by the Russian disinformation instrument, Internet Research Agency (IRA). General secretary of the Norwegian Press Association, Elin Floberghagen, stressed the seriousness: «It is highly unfortunate. Simultaneously it shows that the media has got to be even more source critical than before, when they gather information from for instance social media»<sup>6</sup> (Grut, 2020).

If journalists struggle with identifying inauthenticity online, it is safe to assume that it will be difficult for people whose daily activity is not the thorough checking of facts. But how widespread is online disinformation and misinformation in the Norwegian public? From data gathered in November and December of 2020, the Norwegian Media Authority released a report on «Fake news and disinformation»<sup>7</sup> (Medietilsynet, 2021). Notably, 68% of Norwegian citizens had encountered information they doubted the veracity of throughout the past year (Medietilsynet, 2021: 5). 51% had seen misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic (Medietilsynet, 2021: 15). Generalizing from these respondents, 35% of the general public had encountered such content on Facebook (Medietilsynet, 2021: 16).

Disinformation can be used in influence operations by hostile states to undermine Norwegian public debate. In a feature article by Dagens Næringsliv in October 2020, the discussions in relation to a closed cyber security conference were reported (Kibar, 2020). The then departing chief of the Norwegian Intelligence Services, Morten Haga Lunde, commented the developments: «The past decade of increasing rivalry and conflict levels in international superpower politics have coincided with a digital revolution which have made technology, information and internetbased media way more accessible»<sup>8</sup> (Kibar, 2020). He continues, saying: «These trends have combined to create a situation where influence- and intelligence activities now make up central and integrated tools in Russia's, China's and other states' battle for status, influence and economic and military power»<sup>9</sup> (Kibar, 2020). A team of researchers at SINTEF, commissioned by the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, analyzed the public debate surrounding the Norwegian local elections of 2019 in search of organized disinformation. The results were reassuring but came with a strong caution: «We found no evidence that foreign influence attempts took place. However we discovered that covert networks and fake news in social media represents a challenge for democracy»<sup>10</sup> (Grøtan, Fiskvik, Haro & Brandtzæg, 2020).

Both Lunde and the Director of community contact in the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, Eskil Grendahl Sivertsen, describe a scenario where regular Norwegian citizens may engage in what appears to be legitimate political debate, but which in reality have originated in deliberate disinformation-dissemination by a foreign state. Sivertsen explained further: «If you wish to create division in society, you have the target group already gathered on the internet and social media. You can reach them with one keystroke. You can fire them up even more without them being aware themselves»<sup>11</sup> (Kibar, 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> «Det er veldig uheldig. Samtidig viser det at mediene må være enda mer kildekritiske enn tidligere, når de henter opplysninger fra for eksempel sosiale medier.»

<sup>7</sup> «Falske nyheter og desinformasjon»

<sup>8</sup> «Det siste tiårets tiltagende rivalisering og konfliktnivå i internasjonal stormaktspolitikk har sammenfalt med en digital revolusjon som har gjort teknologi, informasjon og internettbaserte medier langt mer tilgjengelige»

<sup>9</sup> «Disse trendene har virket sammen og skapt en situasjon der påvirknings- og etterretningsaktivitet nå utgjør sentrale og integrerte virkemidler i Russlands, Kinas og andre staters kamp om status, innflytelse og økonomisk og militær makt»

<sup>10</sup> «Vi fant ingen bevis for at utenlandske påvirkningsforsøk fant sted. Derimot oppdaget vi at skjulte nettverk og falske nyheter i sosiale medier utgjør en utfordring for demokratiet»

<sup>11</sup> «Hvis du vil prøve å skape splid i samfunnet, har du målgruppen allerede samlet på internett og sosiale medier. Du har tilgang til dem med et tastetrykk. Du kan fyre dem opp enda mer uten at de vet det selv»

The Depstrat, a then previously undisclosed coalition of actors led by the Ministry of Defence to equip Norway against influence operations, were introduced in the article. What surprised several of the involved was the lack of control at the hands of the Police Security Services (PST). The law against 'subversive activity', was removed in 2005, on account of Norway having exceptionally «strong political and social unity» (Kibar, 2020). This law deemed «influencing the public's opinion about the state's form of government or foreign policy or for party purposes»<sup>12</sup> illegal (Kibar, 2020). Since then, PST have had no legal basis for monitoring such activity. The Norwegian Intelligence Services inform however that they have the responsibility to uncover and warn of external threats against Norway, especially if it is related to the Norwegian armed forces abroad.

The approach of making online disinformation and misinformation illegal is however not without its perils. Journalist Martin Gedde-Dahl wrote a commentary in *Morgenbladet*, reflecting on how what is deemed as misinformation has changed throughout the past year (2021). Knowledge is always contingent on social practices and interpretation, something which can result in disparate views on for example the utility of face masks. Health expert on infection control at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI), Preben Aavitsland, disregarded it in January of 2020 as «a cultural phenomenon in parts of Asia»<sup>13</sup> (Gedde-Dahl, 2021). A similar statement today would be removed on Facebook for breach of standards, as the knowledge base have been updated (if not for also being plain derogatory). Gedde-Dahl regards the World Health Organization's metaphor of an 'infodemic' as an idea resembling totalitarianism. While avoiding concluding on any measures, he points out that even health authorities make misjudgments. Censoring information can in such cases be dangerous too, not to mention in environments where the Government are the ones producing the disinformation.

### 1.3 Academic discourse of online disinformation and misinformation

The academic discourse of online disinformation and misinformation has attempted to conceptualize the problem, explore conditions of resilience and understand how authenticity is accepted. Online disinformation and misinformation have mostly been referred to indiscriminately up to this point in the thesis. Disinformation and misinformation, while both indicating false information, differ in terms of the intent of the sender. While misinformation can be created and spread without ill intention, disinformation requires a strategic purpose (Humphrecht et. al., 2020: 495). The distinction is however not always clear-cut, as it can be hard to decipher actors' real intentions. The two can also be thought to overlap when well-meaning audiences forward what originated as disinformation. Moreover, as pointed out by Bente Kalsnes in her book on the topic, the author of a statement is sometimes unknown or an imposter — making it even more difficult to judge (2019: 38). The challenge to separate disinformation and misinformation is reflected in the data where actors use them interchangeably, although some actors are exclusively concerned with online disinformation. For the purpose of not disregarding valuable perspectives I have chosen to treat the two together.

Other concepts which deserve some initial clarification are the popular 'fake news' and conspiracy theory terms. «[...] fake news is a problematic and controversial term»<sup>14</sup>, writes Kalsnes in her book titled *Fake News: Lies, disinformation and propaganda in the digital*

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<sup>12</sup> «påvirke allmennhetens mening om statens styreform eller utenrikspolitikk eller til partiformål»

<sup>13</sup> «en kulturell greie i deler av Asia»

<sup>14</sup> «[...] falske nyheter er et problematisk og kontroversielt begrep»

*public*<sup>15</sup> (2019: 34). Besides being imprecise, it can imply a connection between 'fake news' and editorial news, thus weakening the trust in real news, not least when politicians use it to reject criticism against themselves, of which there have been some instances in Norway (Kalsnes, 2019: 92). Critique against the term is also recited in Durach et al.: «the buzz word 'fake news' [...] is seen as 'inadequate, imprecise and misleading'» (2020: 6). I refrain from further use of the term, except in the citing of actors using it.

In the book *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries* a definition of conspiracy theories is referenced (Astapova, Bergmann, Dyrendal, Rabo, Rasmussen, Thórisdóttir & Önnersfors, 2021) A conspiracy theory is «an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons [...] acting in secret for their own common good» (Astapova et. al, 2021: 4). Conspiracy theories can play a part in disinformation campaigns, and is used actively in information warfare between states, explains Asbjørn Dyrendal and Terje Emberland in their book *What is conspiracy theories*<sup>16</sup> (2019: 142-3). Yet, conspiracy theories can also serve innocent social purposes. «A 'conspiracy belief' is, then, when an individual assumes that a conspiracy theory provides an acceptable approximation of an explanation of particular events» (Astapova et al., 2021: 4). Conspiracy theories can mark out a social controversy, or be a way of «dealing with the complexity of the modern world» (Astapova et al., 2021: 4). Both disinformation and misinformation can contain conspiracy theories. They are referred to by some actors in my data, and is the chief focus of one. In the analysis and discussion I will equate it with disinformation and misinformation as treated above, where it is not otherwise explicitly distinguished.

The countering of online disinformation have been the topic of several international studies. In their study of the countering of online disinformation at the EU level, Flavia Durach, Alina Bârgaoany and Catalina Nastasiu, delimit disinformation to be «'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information' that was created to 'intentionally cause public harm or for profit'» (2020: 6). They observe shortcomings in the EU public conversation about the problem, describing a focus too minded on single instances and too little on broader developments. Durach et al. critique what they see as a bias of responsibility placed on journalism and critical media awareness over the properties of the new digital ecosystem. This bias is attributed to the conceptualization of online disinformation as a problem of false content instead of a problem of false content jacked up by the possibilities of digital platforms. Seeing these together is what they call a multi-layered perspective. In Durach et al.'s (2020: 7) view, the questions which confront policy-makers and regulatory bodies are:

- Where to distribute responsibility for the rise in online disinformation?
- What aspects to target to mitigate it?
- How to regulate the landscape of digital platforms?

Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser and Peter Van Aelst explored the structural conditions for a country's resilience to online disinformation (2020). They deducted a framework of conditions, which they then operationalized to quantitative indicators to compare the degree of resilience between 18 Western democracies. The concept of resilience is taken to be a collective trait of a community or society; the capacity for people to «sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it» (Humprecht et al., 2020: 497). In the context of online disinformation and misinformation, good conditions for resilience means a harsher environment for online disinformation and misinformation to be spread and believed in.

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<sup>15</sup> «Falske Nyheter: Løgn, desinformasjon og propaganda i den digitale offentligheten»

<sup>16</sup> *Hva er konspirasjonsteorier*

The seven dimensions of the framework by Humprecht et al. (2020: 502) were built upon past studies of political, media and economic matters and include the following:

- the degree of polarization (inverted)
- the level of populist communication (inverted)
- the extent to which the population trust news
- the strength of the public service broadcasting (PSB)
- the degree to which news-audiences overlap each other
- the size of the ad market (inverted)
- the rate of social media users (inverted)

When running an ordinary least squares linear regression, with reported exposure to dis- and misinformation from Reuters' Digital News Report as dependent variable and the seven factors for each country as independent variables, the framework could predict 83 percent of the variance. Yet for each dimension individually, only trust in news, social media usage and ad market size were statistically significant variables in their dataset.

Based on the dimensions, Humprecht et al. grouped the 18 countries in three clusters. Norway was placed in the *high level of resilience* cluster (Humprecht et al., 2020: 505). Norway's quantitative score were positive for all dimensions, but in sum behind Finland, Denmark, The Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom. The countries of this cluster were characterized as *media supportive and more consensual*, «marked by low levels of polarization and populist communication, high levels of media trust and shared news consumption, and a strong PSB» (Humprecht et al., 2020: 507). The authors attribute the high level of resilience especially to strong institutions that inform the public and empower citizens to expose fraud. Online disinformation has not been too widespread in the countries of this cluster, in line with the expectations of the framework. However, it is pointed out that in the United Kingdom for instance, «disinformation was a major problem during the Brexit campaign» (Humprecht et al., 2020: 508). Therefore, it is worthwhile to consider ways to improve resilience further in these countries too.

Astapova et al. (2021) also treat the conditions of trust in Norway and the other Nordic countries. With reference to the European Social Survey, with a measure of expressed social trust, i.e. interpersonal trust towards «most people», Norway has consistently scored high from 2002 to 2016 (Astapova et al., 2021: 7). Alongside Denmark, Sweden and Finland, the social trust in Norway is described as «clearly higher than the social trust in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom» (Astapova et al., 2021: 7). When it comes to trust in the national parliament, the pattern repeats as «consistently higher» than in these same reference countries (Astapova et al., 2021: 7). Astapova et al. remark that the Nordic countries are interesting to explore because belief in conspiracy theories tend to be less common in environments of high social and political trust. As a counterpoint, they also bring up that high intra-inclusiveness is paired with a trait of exo-exclusion in the Nordic political culture (Astapova et al., 2021: 8). This can catalyze intolerance and subsequent conspiracy theories of the foreign.

While it is a useful exercise to define online disinformation and misinformation in their own right, we can also view it through the lens of 'mediated authenticity'. This theory refers to the ways different media and genres negotiate authenticity with audiences when mediating representations of reality (Enli, 2015: 1). Authenticity can be taken to mean the «opposition to whatever is fake, unreal, or false», or the perception of something as such (Enli, 2015: 2). Different media genres use different techniques when presenting stories or reports, whether it is the news genre or 'reality-TV'. The theory centers on the concept of the authenticity

contract, a symbolic (and sometimes institutionalised) agreement between the audiences, producers and regulatory authorities (Enli, 2015: 16). Each party contribute their expectations for the mediation of content relative to genre, and when these are mutually fulfilled, authenticity is achieved.

When expectations are broken however, such as when the rules of a gameshow are exposed as fraud, or a blog is discovered to be a hoax, as Gunn Enli describes, the authenticity contract breaks down (2020). Online disinformation can in this sense be understood as an authenticity scandal, where producers of information have misled audiences by abusing their expectations. Disinformation can for instance appropriate the news genre to present false stories, or a social media bot can impersonate a regular citizen. The rise of new media technologies and formats such as social media, puts all parties at a test for how authenticity is to be negotiated. Producers must learn to mediate in new ways (dishonest producers as well), audiences to be receptive in new ways and regulators to set new rules. The agency of the platform developers who design the new media technologies should at no point be forgotten either.

To sum up, the academic discourse of online disinformation and misinformation have pointed out the difference between the two. As this is a question of the intentions of the producers of a message, which can be hard to access, the distinction is not always clear. 'Fake news' is a buzzword which can create harmful association between disinformation and the news genre. Conspiracy theories can feature in disinformation or misinformation depending on whether the theory is a genuine belief or has been made up to be cause confusion and anger through for example disinformation campaigns. Durach et al. argue that regulators must approach online disinformation and misinformation with a multi-layered perspective. A society's resilience to online disinformation has been studied, where trust, in the form of trust in news, social trust and political trust, is a common theme. Another way to conceptualize disinformation and misinformation is as text failing to live up to standards of authenticity.

## 1.4 Research questions

Keeping the above treatment of the public conversation and academic discourses in mind, I designate three research questions to comprehend how online disinformation and misinformation is constructed by actors in Norwegian society.

As pointed out by Durach et al. (2020: 6), an appropriate problem-description of the responsible causes is crucial to mitigate online disinformation and misinformation effectively. The public conversation I have briefly covered indicates that these are varied and can relate to social media, political tensions and controversies. A wider analysis can reveal the patterns in the public conversation and expert discourses which is part of the basis for potential responsive measures by actors in Norwegian society. One question my research should answer is thus:

- What causes of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway do Norwegian actors perceive?

Another theme of the public conversation on online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is what the issue threatens. This shows the normative reasoning for the need to take action. Some of the above examples highlight the risk for democratic debate and the health of citizens in the pandemic. In the further analysis I will look for how Norwegian actors collectively envision a future where Norway is affected by online disinformation and misinformation. I intend to answer the following:

- How do Norwegian actors envision possible futures for Norway if affected by online disinformation and misinformation?

The third aspect I will explore is how actors propose going about solving or mitigating online disinformation and misinformation in Norway. Source criticalness and fact checking were mentioned among the above examples, as well as the contentious measure of censorship. The construction of solutions to online disinformation and misinformation requires active interpretation by actors who involve themselves. The question is:

- How do Norwegian actors propose going about solving online disinformation and misinformation in Norway?

## **1.5 The theories, methods and conclusions of this thesis**

To ensure clarity for readers, I here present the theories, methods and conclusions of this thesis. This thesis seeks to analyze how online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is constructed by actors in Norwegian society in light of theories from the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies. The theories applied are principally discourse analysis, sociotechnical imaginaries and the social construction of technology.

The data of this study consist of articles, reports and websites available on the internet. They have been pragmatically selected to answer the research questions. The data was gathered from search queries for the keywords 'disinformation', 'misinformation', 'fake news' and 'conspiracy theories'. The data was categorized from patterns in the content. The qualitative analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks. Discourse analysis is used to illuminate the causal constructs perceived by the actors. The theory of sociotechnical imaginaries highlight the actors' normative perceptions of the problem. The social construction of technology theory help to show how different actors have a preference for different interventions to the problem.

The totality of this comprises the construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway. The actors construct both social and technical causes. The social causes are primarily political influence from specified or unspecified parties. Economic motives are also pointed out by some actors, while situations of crisis and the effect of emotions are mentioned by a few. The technical causes to online disinformation and misinformation are less prominent among the actors than the social ones. By those who mention them, they relate to the internet and social media, and the properties these possess, such as algorithms, lack of editorial filters and tools to target individual users.

The normative problems of online disinformation and misinformation imagined by the actors focus on the threat to trust and democracy. Trust is perceived threatened socially among the population, in politics, in news and in authorities. Some actors fear less trust in society could lead to a weakened Norway's democracy. A few actors also worry that disinformation could directly influence elections.

When it comes to solving the problem, actors express interpretations for how to do this that fit in two categories. The hermeneutic solutions seek to improve the ability of audiences to recognize and discard online disinformation and misinformation. This is proposed achieved by training individuals in critical media awareness, by encouraging individuals to take responsibility, by authorities being transparent about known disinformation targets and sources and by maintaining strong and independent news media. The other category centers on interventions in the platform. Content moderation, embedding fact-checks on controversial topics, linking to trustworthy sources and a contingency plan against hacking are solutions



advocated for by the actors. Interpretations of solving the online disinformation and misinformation problem with artificial intelligence are unrealized due to privacy concerns.

A further conclusion about the construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is that trust stands as a counterpoint for society. This is evident from the centrality of trust in the sociotechnical imaginaries, in the authorities' trust in individuals to exercise critical media awareness successfully and in the expectation that audiences trust regulators with platform solutions. In addition, the level of trust can contribute to resilience against online disinformation and misinformation, and reversely the lack of it can make society vulnerable. If the normative assumptions of the actors sociotechnical imaginaries are justified, it is vital to counter online disinformation and misinformation in order to safeguard trust and sustain the resilience of Norwegian society.

A final conclusion of this thesis is that successfully countering online disinformation and misinformation represents a restored contract between producers, regulators and audiences of what constitutes authenticity online. The hermeneutic solutions hold producers accountable to the audiences, while the platform solutions rely on the audience's trust when moderating the information presented.

## 2. Theories

In this chapter I address the theoretical foundations for my research and analysis. I introduce the field of Science and technology studies, and briefly explain some of its core assumptions toward the relationship between science, technology and society. I then move to the theoretical frameworks I draw on in my analysis. I complete the chapter by returning to the questions that guides my research, to clarify how they relate to the theories introduced.

### 2.1 Science and technology studies

Science and technology studies (STS) is an interdisciplinary field interested in the interactions between science, technology and society. A foundational notion is that science and technology are social practices (Sismondo, 2010: 10-11). For this reason, there is no linearly developing science or technology, even if breakthroughs and innovations can seem entirely logical in hindsight.

The work done to introduce a new technological product can be characterized as 'heterogeneous engineering' (Sismondo, 2010: 65). Realizing a technology relies as much on mobilizing the resources and actors required to facilitate production and enable distribution in the social context, as it does on concrete techniques and knowledge used to put together the artifact. Accordingly, an entrepreneur must take diverse factors into account if they are to be successful, and these differ between societies and cultures. For example, you would have to keep different regulatory conditions in mind if you were to launch a digital platform in the U.S. than you would in Norway. Conditions such as these will also change through time, as a culture undergoes change.

A perspective which highlights the interdependencies of science, technology and society is the concept of 'co-production' (Sismondo, 2010: 67). In abstract terms: A society's technology is made possible through its science, which in turn were directed to study specific issues by, or in, society. And studies are carried out using concrete technologies, which have been designed in society. In the co-productionist sense, the digital platforms we have are a result of our society, but our society is simultaneously formed in the usage of these digital platforms.

The three main theoretical frameworks I draw upon in my research are discourse analysis, sociotechnical imaginaries and the social construction of technology (SCOT). Discourse analysis offers a clear approach to analyze the construction of meaning through text. The theory of sociotechnical imaginaries serves to link technology with normative conceptions in society. The SCOT model offer concepts for analyzing the proposal of solutions by different actors.

#### 2.1.1 Discourse analysis as theory

The term 'social constructionism' refers to a range of theories highlighting the contingency of our social world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 4-6). Although social constructionist perspectives vary, all of them share a set of core assumptions about knowledge and reality. The reality we as humans know is not 'objectively true' but mediated through representations (which in turn are mediated through unique mediums and situations, such as a conversation, a newspaper, a telescope or a social media platform). These representations are culturally positioned, and they come about, persist and change through social processes. Our knowledge is in turn the ground on which we make social actions and continually shape our world. This realization is simultaneously why online disinformation and misinformation can be dangerous, and why knowing the issue matters if one aims to counter it effectively.

Discourse analysis is one specific strand of social constructionism, privileging language as the interface on which we come to know and create a meaningful reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 8-12). Language is embedded in wider discursive patterns, collectively making up the dynamic and relational network of signs. Usage of language (production and consumption of text or speech) is discursive practice and contributes to sustain or change these discursive patterns. Thus, analysis of language use and its contexts can reveal the discursive patterns and their associated social worlds. There are numerous approaches to discourse analysis, but I base mine on Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as presented by Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jørgensen (2002). A 'discourse' can be defined as «a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)» (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 1). As an aspect of our society, online disinformation and misinformation can be understood differently in different discourses. When I analyze the discourses of online disinformation and misinformation (or aspects of this issue), I examine the language actors use to make, and construct, sense of this. One aspect of their language use of special relevance in this context, is the transitivity in their statements; the connection of processes (such as the increased spread of disinformation) with responsible subjects and objects (such as foreign states and social media) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 83).

Fairclough holds discursive practice to be one of many potential aspects or 'moments' making up a social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 19). Other moments are based in other logics, such as economic or material ones, or otherwise institutionalized social structures, and relate to the discursive moment dialectically. When actors attempt to mitigate a problem such as online disinformation and misinformation, their actions are thus not simply discursive, but also bound by economic circumstances and institutionalized roles. A directorate for example, has a finite number of employees and budget, and governmentally assigned goals to fulfill. Moments such as these interact with the discursive moment, all moments potentially influencing one another. Views diverge on whether to treat this distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive as an empirical or analytical one (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 89). Jørgensen and Phillips presents the solution by Lilie Chouliaraki, that while our meaningful reality is only accessible to us through representations, we can see specific social practices as analytically non-discursive (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 90). In my example, this means that while the 'budget' of a directorate is itself a discursively constructed representation, we treat it as a non-discursive one for the purpose of creating a productive analysis.

This distinction is also important because it invites Fairclough's encouragement of combining discourse analysis with other social theories depending on the object of analysis. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework combines textual analysis with social analysis of the cultural practices and contexts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 66). While the textual analysis relies on linguistic theory, the social analysis should make sense of the wider social practices being studied (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 86). For my purposes, these are theories which illuminate the social processes that go into developing the sociotechnical practices associated with online disinformation and misinformation, such as the theory of mediated authenticity for example.

The aim of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis is in part to uncover power relations produced by ideological effects and to arrive at 'explanatory critique' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 63-64). In my analysis I am not concerned with the concept of ideology, a concept Jørgensen and Phillips object to for lacking operationalizability (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 75). I do however attempt an explanatory critique in the discussion of my conclusions into how online disinformation and misinformation is being constructed. Although not concerning myself with measuring equality and justice directly, I hypothesize that certain sociotechnical designs will promote these values more than others. In this case the explanatory reference is to limit

harmful spread of disinformation and misinformation as much as possible. Explanatory critique ground itself in the idea of 'misrepresentation', which require that the researcher have access to a more appropriate perspective of the issue (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 77). I attempt to source this 'more appropriate perspective' in the analysis of how the actors view causes, potential futures and proposed solutions, as opposed to the individual actors' views.

### 2.1.2 Sociotechnical imaginaries

Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim's concept of sociotechnical imaginaries builds on the notions of coproduction, but explicitly includes a society's collective beliefs on the cast list. As is explained, «[...] STS has paid relatively less attention to the aspirational and normative dimensions of social order captured by the notion of imaginaries» (Jasanoff, 2015: 5). With the concept Jasanoff and Kim seeks to accomplish better understandings of how and why certain technoscientific phenomena differ or emerge consistent through time and space and across political and cultural environments where this is not otherwise apparent in other structural variables (Jasanoff, 2015: 3; 21). It is also a refusal to treat human and nonhuman agents as equally responsible for outcomes only the first is able to conceive of in advance, as Actor-Network Theory has been inclined to (Jasanoff, 2015: 16-17). For example, an algorithm selecting and presenting content on a digital platform orders this content in a specific way. But this way is always conditioned by the ambitions the programmer had while coding it. The ambitions of the programmer are in turn directed by the leaders who hired her. Moreover, these leaders are affected by the cultural currents of society — and perhaps directly subservient the major shareholders. All the human actors involved will have specific intents, while the algorithm will not.

The focus of the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is on the forming, keeping and reforming of shared ambitions for society, both implicating and implicated by, science and technology. Jasanoff and Kim define it as «collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology» (Jasanoff, 2015: 4). 'Collectively' is delimited to for example «organized groups, such as corporations, social movements, and professional societies» (Jasanoff, 2015: 4). Since a society can have many such groups with competing or aligned imaginaries, outcomes are typically realized through institutionalization in for instance laws or policy. It is stressed that un-desirable futures, and how to avoid them, can likewise be the object of sociotechnical imaginaries. The imaginaries have to be distinguished from ideology, which is held to be too static (among other differences), but also from «fleeting policy preference», which is too dynamic (Jasanoff, 2015: 20; 24).

When it comes to online disinformation and misinformation, the sociotechnical imaginaries are, by my interpretation of this theory, for example not a question of how science and technology can help protect the integrity of the next election in line — it is then a question of how it can sustain democratic integrity as a broader concept. Imaginaries do not stop at the controversy of vaccines — they encompass the more opaque but omnipresent qualities of how we, always with the help of technologies, practice public debates or negotiate trust in society, including in health-related controversies. Online disinformation and misinformation relate, for most people and society at large, to fears of un-desirable futures. This explains why actors are willing to take preventative actions. Norwegian society's sociotechnical imaginaries are made explicit in harmonizing statements by actors of a certain scale, such as businesses or, as there are more of in my material, directorates and institutes. With respect to this research's temporal resources, my material does not include the performative dimension of these imaginaries found by observing actions undertaken. Like discourses, imaginaries are present in contexts of

meaning-making, and uncovered in framings of future possibilities. The strength of the latter theory lies in illuminating the indisputably normative aspects of science and technology.

### 2.1.3 The social construction of technology

Discourse analysis and sociotechnical imaginaries can give valuable insight into perceptions of causal connections and normative expectations respectively, with regards to a sociotechnical matter such as online disinformation and misinformation. To address how actors come up with solutions to this challenge, I will employ theory from the social construction of technology (SCOT). SCOT is a framework that has evolved from analyzing the social construction of individual artefacts, to seeing these as part of broader systems, ensembles and cultures (Bijker, 2010: 66-67). These developments have brought attention to the broader social relations technologies are part of. My analysis will by the temporal constraints of this thesis concentrate on the specific solutions proposed to counter online disinformation and misinformation, and not include a wider SCOT analysis. It is nevertheless crucial to keep in mind that they function within wider cultural and social contexts, parts of which become visible in the proposed solutions.

The SCOT model for studying technology centers on the artefact (Bijker, 2010: 68). To analyze the construction of an artefact one considers the relevant social groups and their interpretative flexibility. Relevant social groups come into being through a common relation towards an artefact. Relations can be recognized when they are articulated; actors with common articulations make up one relevant social group. There will often be several different relevant social groups, relating to an artefact in different ways. This shows how the artefact in question is flexibly interpreted by different actors — it has interpretative flexibility. In this thesis, there is no clear-cut artefact in focus, but rather an abstract 'thing', which I will, as Wiebe Bijker put it, «*address as technologies*» (2010: 73). Solving online disinformation and misinformation is interpreted differently by actors forming different relevant social groups in the process.

The point of a SCOT analysis can be to explain how a technology becomes successful, while other versions are discarded. As relevant social groups engage with an artefact, some of them will impose their interests more effectively than others. This is the process of stabilization (Bijker, 2010: 69). When some interpretations are consolidated by choices in design (or other organization of the artefact), the artefact has reached closure. Alternative choices, which may have been viable options for different, or quite similar, reasons, are made extinct. An example which different social groups engage with currently is to what extent, or in what form, social media platforms should have active content moderation. Advocating this feature could for example be part of an interpretation towards a solution to online disinformation and misinformation, if it was reasoned this way.

Explaining the process of stabilization towards closure can be assisted by the concept of the technological frame (Bijker, 2010:69). The relation of a relevant social group is ordered towards the artefact in accordance with its technological frame; governmental functions have different options for actions from a private business or a non-governmental organization. This may be related to the allocation of resources, competencies or power relevant for the artefact in question. The technological frame thus impacts the ways a relevant social group goes about stabilizing an artefact through their interpretations. An illustration of this could be the ways Facebook relates to this problem compared to the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry have the resources, competencies and power to propose laws which may affect a social media platform, while Facebook have the resources, competencies and power to create the computer code that makes up their social media platform.

## 2.2 The relation of the theories to the research questions

The three main theoretical frameworks I have just presented can help answer my research questions. The theories overlap in respect to social constructionist assumptions but have a few characteristics that give each their respective advantages. I here clarify how each theory guides me toward relevant and precise answers.

Discourse analysis is suitable to illuminate the constructed meanings actors tie to a phenomenon. The transitivity of processes is especially relevant for the first research question as it asks how Norwegian actors perceive online disinformation and misinformation in Norway to come about, or are caused. This will give indications of what discourses and discursive patterns of the issue exist, and which that are more widespread in Norwegian society. Each of the actors' statements are discursive practice which contribute to create those. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis also take other moments of social life into account, which is important to attempt explaining why it makes sense for different actors to construct a problem in their own way.

Sociotechnical imaginaries stand out through their specific attention to society's collective preferences for certain sociotechnical futures over others. The theory of sociotechnical imaginaries pivots around the normative views of technology in futures actors believe are possible or likely. Online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is an issue which involves both the social aspects of production and reception of information, and the technical aspects of media technologies. Actors making statements about what the issue might lead to create depictions of how society might be changed and therefore why actions are needed to either make this future happen or to avoid it. The sociotechnical imaginaries found in such statements animate not only how actors view the issue, but also how they understand what society is and should be.

The SCOT theory offer understanding of how actors relate to solving online disinformation and misinformation as an 'artefact' open to interpretation. Actors articulate such relations in statements where concrete solutions are proposed. A relevant social group is formed when actors express similar interpretations. The technological frame, the practical and material ways actors relate to the artefact, can contribute to explain the basis for their interpretations. An artefact is stabilized towards specific solutions when these are more effectively proposed and held to esteem by larger relevant social groups. Closure is reached when some solutions are implemented while others are discarded.

### 3. Methods

The main aim of this thesis is to answer: *How is online disinformation and misinformation in Norway being constructed by actors in Norwegian society?* Having established the theories which will help me do so, I will now go over my methodological considerations. Methods are applied in science to conduct academically sound research (Grønmo, 2016: 41). The general meaning of this is to proceed in a planned and systematic way to produce reliable and relevant knowledge. This involves both specific principles and practical techniques.

#### 3.2 Units, selection and data

The aim and research questions of this thesis direct my interest toward the units for analysis. An analytical unit refers in social science to an element or social entity in society which is of interest in the study (Grønmo, 2016: 93). The most usual analytical entity in social science is the actor, which can be an individual or a collective of sorts. In this study, actors in Norwegian society are the unit of interest. Units can be differentiated by their analytical level (Grønmo, 2016: 95). I defined the units of this thesis to have to be between the micro and macro levels, in order to be representative of a larger group of relevance for society, but not so large as to exceed the level of Norwegian society itself. The typical unit on the intermediate level is the organization or businesses (Grønmo, 2016: 96). An actor can be the unit of analysis even if it is represented by an individual in a specific context (Grønmo, 2016: 93).

The population of a research project are all the entities of society applicable to the unit of the problem statement (Grønmo, 2016: 98). Since the study cannot achieve a complete account of the whole population, a selection has to be made. In this thesis the selection of units has been done pragmatically. A pragmatic selection is done when a study intends to explore the issue, but not provide a systematic generalization to the population of the study (Grønmo, 2016: 100). The units for analysis have been selected based on regards for relevancy and access of information. Within the time limits of the project, a variation in the type of actors represented have been striven for to include a broad range of perspectives.

To analyze the selected units, data is required. Specifying the data is primarily a question of what type of information is relevant and how it should be selected (Grønmo, 2016: 121). To reveal how the actors are constructing online disinformation and misinformation in Norway, it is their expressions that are of interest. The expressions were selected by searching on the internet for the keywords of the study in the Norwegian language: 'disinformation', 'misinformation', 'conspiracy theories' and 'fake news'<sup>17</sup>. These were represented in articles, reports and on webpages, which are the documents that constitute my data sources. All sources have been evaluated as trustworthy, on the basis of coming from an editorial news site or an actor's own website. The benefit of using naturally occurring data from already existing social processes is that the risk of the research interfering with the data is eliminated.

#### 3.3 Analysis of data

The data sources were qualitatively analyzed to reveal the content relevant to the research questions. A qualitative analysis is conducted by systematizing selected citations of text (Grønmo, 2016: 142). Each of the research questions designate certain expressions as relevant. For the first research question, statements about the transitivity of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway were of interest. These are expressions such as «[perceived agent or object] is the cause of online disinformation and misinformation». For the second research question, the connection is from the online disinformation and misinformation

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<sup>17</sup> 'desinformasjon', 'feilinformasjon', 'konspirasjonsteorier' og 'falske nyheter'

to a threatened element: «online disinformation and misinformation can lead to [feared risk]». For the last research question, statements which propose solutions to the problem were collected. For example: «[solution] is the best way to counter online disinformation and misinformation».

To make sense of the collected data, the technique of categorizing can assist the researcher (Grønmo, 2016: 179). The categories were induced from the content of the data, which allowed new interpretations to be formed from the arising patterns. The categories and data were organized in spreadsheets. These categories make up the parts of each section in the observations chapter. To get a visual overview of the observations for analyzing the data further, a matrix of all recorded expressions for each actor by each category were made.

### **3.4 Quality of data, challenges and reflexivity**

The quality of the data in the study is evaluated in terms of its suitability to answer its research questions (Grønmo, 2016: 237). The conditions for this are whether the data represents verified information, the data gathering follow the principles of logic and language, the selection of units are properly done, the selection of information types is systematically performed and the gathering of data has been done correctly (Grønmo, 2016: 238).

One notable challenge for this research is the vagueness and variability in the terms used for online disinformation and misinformation. This relates to the condition of the data gathering to follow principles of logic and language. The concepts the actors use to describe the issue of online disinformation and misinformation vary widely, partly because of the terms' lack of specificity. As was discussed in the introduction, especially when actors use the term 'fake news', it can be hard to know what they mean. This is also due to the nature of the problem, as it is hard for actors to know whether a specific case represents disinformation or misinformation. One strategy of this research to tackle this challenge is to treat these processes broadly.

The analysis of content in naturally occurring data avoids influencing the data about the units of analysis (Grønmo, 2016: 180). As long as the texts are carefully processed during the analysis, the meaning is not changed. However, the perspective of the researcher can affect the selection and interpretations of the data. To mitigate such effects in this study, the relevant criteria for the data selection were closely followed throughout the data gathering. This included using the relevant keywords to find the documents where actors at the intermediate level of Norwegian society were represented with relevant expressions. To avoid bias of interpretations, the expressions should be regarded in the context they were written (Grønmo, 2016: 181).

The data does not include expressions for all research questions from all actors. These could either have been uncovered in a more extensive data gathering or the unfilled dimensions were not relevant enough for the given actors to express anything about it. One actor for example does not feature in the sociotechnical imaginaries dimension in my material. This does not mean that they do not have normative viewpoints. The fact that they have expressed concern over the causes and taken initiative towards solutions does indicate that they deem online disinformation and misinformation harmful — my material just does not tell us for what reasons.

More certain conclusions can be drawn for research questions where an actor's constructs are featured in either or both categories, because this indicates that they were concerned with the likely causes, possible futures or potential solutions in the given context where they made a



construct. The constructs from another of the actors are for example only within one category for each category. None of the actors in my material had presented constructs in both categories for all research questions, but five were only absent in one each.

## 4. Observations

In this chapter I present how I have categorized the data in order to answer the research questions. Each research question has been assigned its own subchapter and is divided into designated categories.

### 4.1 Discourse of causes

In this section I show the answers to the first research question: *What causes of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway do Norwegian actors perceive?* In my material, I found some constructs that focused on social causes and some on technical ones. The socially orientated constructs consider interests and motives, or specify, at varying degrees of specificity, certain actors. The constructs with a technical orientation are instead concerned with the technical properties of media and digital technologies which enable or stimulate such spreading. Most actors and texts carry constructs belonging to both categories.

#### 4.1.1 Social causes

The social causes to online disinformation and misinformation, as constructed by my actors in the field, are varied. Some address a range of possible motives as an important factor. Other constructs point to unspecified malicious parties as the driving force. I also found constructs which specified the motives and parties they believe to be at blame. A last set of constructs mentioned situational factors and the emotions of people.

The Directorate for Civil Protection summed up several motives in an information campaign against misinformation on their website: «The purpose can for example be to earn money, fraud, influence your political opinions or create confusion in the population»<sup>18</sup> (DSB, 2021). Ørjan Nordhus Karlsson, senior advisor for the Directorate gave a similarly broad characterization of possible motives, when interviewed for a podcast on the topic: «In this type of event, a large crisis, there appears a vacuum where various actors, often with quite varied motivations, use this to sow doubt and mistrust and to promote their own matters. It can be political, economic or other causes»<sup>19</sup> (Revaa, 2020). The Directorate here use quite broad strokes to describe the motives actors may possess.

An even broader brush is used by the Ministry of Culture in a proposal for a new media law about editorial responsibility. They write: «Other challenges are tied to more fundamental political and social changes in society. This applies to for instance [...], disinformation [...]»<sup>20</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 14). In an educational resource to be used in schools, the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training inform of similar causes. After explaining that it can be hard to distinguish genuine from fake information, the text points to actors with various motives: «Those who create and spread falsities can have political motives or a wish to create information-chaos, draw attention or achieve economic gain or fraud»<sup>21</sup> (Utdanningsdirektoratet, nd). The Committee for the freedom of speech, which I introduced in the very beginning of the thesis also mention social causes vaguely in their mandate: «[...] to

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<sup>18</sup> «Hensikten kan for eksempel være å tjene penger, svindle deg, påvirke hva du mener politisk, eller skape forvirring i befolkningen»

<sup>19</sup> «I denne type hendelser, store kriser, oppstår det et handlingsrom der ulike aktører, ofte med ganske ulik motivasjon, bruker dette til å så tvil og mistillit og til å fremme sine egne saker. Det kan være politiske, økonomiske eller andre årsaker»

<sup>20</sup> «Andre utfordringer er knyttet til mer grunnleggende politiske og sosiale endringer i samfunnet. Dette gjelder for eksempel [...], desinformasjon [...]»

<sup>21</sup> «De som lager og sprer usannheter kan ha politiske motiver eller ha et ønske om å skape informasjonskaos, få oppmerksomhet eller oppnå økonomisk vinning eller svindel»

spread propaganda and disinformation to promote political or commercial interests [...]»<sup>22</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b).

Similar vagueness is also a feature of some constructs about possible responsible parties. In a short interview, political chief of Facebook Norway Marianne Neraal, commented on the role their platform has for the spread of disinformation. They seek understanding of how malicious actors can abuse their social media platform, but does not go into detail about who these are: «What we are trying to understand is how our platforms can be abused by actors with ill intentions, [...]»<sup>23</sup> (NTB, 2020). The National Police Directorate wrote in a report about ICT criminality from 2017 that disinformation could be a weapon by foreign intelligence services: «This are measures that also can be implemented by intelligence services operating against Norway and Norwegian interests. This includes the spreading of disinformation [...]»<sup>24</sup> (Politidirektoratet, 2017: 24).

Other constructs claim that actors using disinformation do not have to be foreign. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security in October 2020 writes in a communication to the Parliament called 'Public security in an insecure world' that: «Also actors within Norway can use disinformation to reach their goals. This can be individuals or representatives of special interests.»<sup>25</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 95). This argument is also made by Roar Thon, senior advisor of security culture in The Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM), who for an article explains that: «Influence does not have to originate with other states, [...] it can just as well be a single and bitter individual who disagrees with the current policies and uses technological tools to sabotage»<sup>26</sup> (Eliassen, 2019). In a blog post about conspiracy theories and disinformation, the Prime Minister also echo this possibility: «Some are shared by troll-factories abroad, others are shared by completely ordinary people»<sup>27</sup> (Solberg, 2020).

While the constructs referenced thus far are notably unspecific, this is not a universal feature in my material. Some constructs connect online disinformation to more precise motives, primarily political and strategic threats. In the communication by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security which I already mentioned in this section, disinformation is also seen as means of attack. Under a subchapter about combined threats, which means a hostile actor applying a range of tactics to harm or influence Norwegian society, it reads that disinformation «can pose as a significant part of combined threats, but can also be a potent instrument in itself»<sup>28</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 95). Another department of the Government, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization correspondingly stress that disinformation can be utilized to attempt manipulating Norwegian elections: «This has nothing to do with our election systems, but of how one can influence people by spreading falsities and offering an incorrect world view»<sup>29</sup> (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019). The statement was part of a press release presenting the Government's 'ten actions against unwanted influence' in the election of 2019.

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<sup>22</sup> «[...] å spre propaganda og desinformasjon for å fremme politiske eller kommersielle interesser [...]»

<sup>23</sup> «Det vi forsøker å forstå er hvordan plattformene våre kan misbrukes av aktører med onde hensikter, [...]»

<sup>24</sup> «Dette er tiltak som også kan iverksettes av etterretningstjenester som opererer mot Norge og norske interesser. Dette innebærer spredning av desinformasjon, [...]»

<sup>25</sup> «Også aktører i Norge kan bruke desinformasjon for å nå sine målsettinger. Dette kan være enkeltpersoner eller representanter for særinteresser»

<sup>26</sup> «Påvirkning trenger ikke å komme fra andre stater, [...] Det kan like gjerne være en enslig og bitter enkeltperson som er uenig i dagens politikk og som bruker teknologiske verktøy for å sabotere»

<sup>27</sup> «Noen deles av trollfabrikker i utlandet, andre deles av helt vanlige mennesker»

<sup>28</sup> «Desinformasjon kan utgjøre en vesentlig del av sammensatt virkemiddelbruk, men det kan også være et potent virkemiddel i seg selv»

<sup>29</sup> «Dette har ikke noe med valgsystemene våre å gjøre, men hvordan man kan påvirke folk ved å spre usannheter og gi et uriktig verdensbilde»

The explicitness of motives continues with the constructs by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST). They annually release a threat assessment to inform the public about the most pressing threats to the nation. In the chapter about foreign intelligence activities disinformation is especially anticipated for certain topics: «targets relating to northern Norway, Svalbard and defense- and the high north policies will be particularly vulnerable»<sup>30</sup> (PST, 2021: 11). Of note is that, while 'extensive' operations have not been observed, there have been discovery of individual attempts of influence: «During the last years we have seen examples of influence and influence attempts in individual cases in Norway»<sup>31</sup> (PST, 2021: 11).

In PST's threat assessment back in 2019, the anticipated motives were the same, but it had not yet been observed: «We should nevertheless be prepared for that foreign states will attempt to influence the public opinion and the political conversation in individual cases in our country too»<sup>32</sup> (PST, 2019: 10). The matters in which Norwegian interests diverge from others are held to be more at risk: «In some areas however there are certain countries that do not share Norway's views and priorities. Here Norwegian political assessments are more exposed to other states' influence operations»<sup>33</sup> (PST, 2019: 10). The County Governor of Vestland has written an article sharing an informational campaign by DSB, PST and others (Stensvand, 2020). Referring to PST's threat assessment of 2019, they echo the sentiment of foreign intelligence as the potential cause of online disinformation. This discursive construct thus only contributes to replicate and further the discourse constructed by PST and DSB. NSM expresses the same perception in a report on digital risks and declares that: «Foreign states are attempting to influence Norwegian decisions to achieve their security policy and strategic goals. Such influence is happening both openly and covertly»<sup>34</sup> (Nasjonal Sikkerhetsmyndighet, 2020: 40).

Constructs specifying the parties who could be guilty of spreading disinformation are also present among my actors. These constructs contrast with the ones above by PST and the Ministry of Justice and Security. The editor of Faktisk.no, Kristoffer Egeberg, mentions Russia in the interview done for the Communications Association: «Russia, factories and others who does propaganda»<sup>35</sup> (Revaa, 2020). Researcher at the Norwegian Institute of Defence Studies (IFS) Anders Romarheim commented, in an interview from 2018, on Russia's attempts at influencing the 2016 election. He saw no reason why it could not happen in Norway: «We must assume that this is happening in Norway too»<sup>36</sup> (Skjeseth & Sæther, 2018). The National Police Directorate also construct online disinformation as a tool Russia might apply: «Russia is developing its abilities to conduct digital sabotage. In some cases this will involve initiating actions to influence political debate or weaken the legitimacy of political decision-making processes»<sup>37</sup> (Politidirektoratet, 2017: 24).

While motives and actors are heavily considered, there are also other contributing social factors mentioned. In an educational resource for schools, the Norwegian Media Authority write that online misinformation has been especially prevalent during the pandemic: «In a crisis there is an enormous need for information. While the Government are working to limit the

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<sup>30</sup> «mål relatert til Nord-Norge, Svalbard og forsvars- og nordområdepolitikken være særlig utsatt»

<sup>31</sup> «De siste årene har vi sett eksempler på påvirkning og påvirkningsforsøk i enkeltsaker i Norge»

<sup>32</sup> «Vi bør likevel være forberedt på at fremmede stater vil kunne forsøke å påvirke opinionen og det politiske ordskiftet i enkeltsaker også i vårt land»

<sup>33</sup> «På noen områder er det imidlertid enkelte land som ikke deler Norges syn og prioriteringer. Her vil norske politiske vurderinger være mer utsatt for andre staters påvirkningsoperasjoner»

<sup>34</sup> «Fremmede stater forsøker å påvirke norske beslutninger for å nå sine sikkerhetspolitiske og strategiske målsettinger. Slik påvirkning skjer både åpent og i det skjulte»

<sup>35</sup> «Russland, løgnfabrikker og andre som driver med propaganda»

<sup>36</sup> «Vi må forutsette at dette også skjer i Norge»

<sup>37</sup> «Russland utvikler sin evne til å gjennomføre digital sabotasje. I enkelte sammenhenger vil det innebære å iverksette tiltak for å påvirke den politiske debatten eller svekke legitimiteten til politiske beslutningsprosesser»

crisis and offer the population access to trustworthy information, we see that fake news-posing articles are spreading, especially in social media»<sup>38</sup> (Medietilsynet, nd.). Another relevant element mentioned by two actors are emotions. The Prime Minister writes in her blogpost about conspiracy theories, a phenomenon I take to coincide with disinformation and misinformation more generally, that «When anger, fear and fantasy are combined, many illusions can emerge»<sup>39</sup> (Solberg, 2020). In their learning resource, the Directorate for Education and Training explains that «Fake news often play to emotions and prejudice. When readers get strong feelings on a matter, it is easy to become less critical. This heightens the chance to share the article further»<sup>40</sup>

To sum up, my actors in the field construct online disinformation and misinformation in various ways related to social causes, mentioning to varying degrees of specificity the motives, interests and perpetrators that might lead to the problem. In addition, human emotions and the pandemic, while generally out of our control, can play its part.

#### 4.1.2 Technical causes

The public discourse of the causes of online disinformation and misinformation also includes technical aspects. The majority of these constructs thematize social media as an important force, sometimes contrasting this with other mediums. Some constructs highlight concrete technological tools while others discuss digital technologies more generally.

The constructs with the least amount of detail are content with referring to the technical causes with a single term, but still manage to convey the importance of this cause. In the mandate of the Committee for the freedom of speech it is brought up that: «The structure of the internet have made it easier than before to spread propaganda and disinformation in order to promote political or commercial interests [...]»<sup>41</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b). This sentiment is shared by Romarheim at IFS who said: «The spread of disinformation is not a new strategy, but has gained a whole new scope with the help of the internet and social media»<sup>42</sup> (Skjeseth og Sæther, 2018). In Prime Minister Solberg's blogpost she also gives digitization a clear role, referring to 'the digital world': «The digital world have made the conspiracy theories come very close upon us. They appear in the comment sections, on websites [...] There is created an echo chamber where people confirm each other's beliefs»<sup>43</sup> (Solberg, 2020).

The constructs featured in the mandate for the Committee for the freedom of speech are not all as general. A strong presence is the contrast of new media technology to editorial news: «The traditional editor's function as gatekeepers and filters against the negative sides of free speech — such as hate, harassment, bullying and disinformation — have been weakened in the new media landscape»<sup>44</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b). This is seen in tandem with the global social media platforms who have adopted this role: «Simultaneously the global media-platforms for uploading and sharing of content have gained a new gatekeeper role, [...] It can be discussed whether the platforms in some cases have gotten such a dominant position that

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<sup>38</sup> «I en krise oppstår et enormt informasjonsbehov. Mens myndighetene jobber for å begrense krisen og gi befolkningen tilgang på troverdig informasjon, ser vi at falske nyhetsliknende saker sprer seg, særlig i sosial medier»

<sup>39</sup> «Når sinne redsel og fantasi kombineres, kan det oppstå mange forestillinger»

<sup>40</sup> «Falske nyheter spiller ofte på følelser og fordommer. Når lesere får sterke følelser for en sak, er det lett å bli mindre kritisk. Dette øker sjansen for å dele saken videre»

<sup>41</sup> «Nettets struktur har gjort det enklere enn før å spre propaganda og desinformasjon for å fremme politiske eller kommersielle interesser [...]»

<sup>42</sup> «Spredning av desinformasjon er ingen ny strategi, men har fått et helt nytt omfang ved hjelp av internett og sosiale medier»

<sup>43</sup> «Den digitale verden har gjort at vi får konspirasjonsteoriene tett inn på kroppen. De dukker opp i kommentarfeltene, på nettsider [...] Det danner seg et ekkokammer der folk bekrefter hverandres oppfatninger»

<sup>44</sup> «De tradisjonelle redaktørens funksjon som portvoktere og filtre mot ytringsfrihetens negative sider - som hat, hets, mobbing og desinformasjon - har blitt svekket i det nye medielandskapet»

their user terms, algorithms and moderation work as a universal frame for free speech»<sup>45</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommissjonen, 2020b).

The Committee for the freedom of speech was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, so it should come as no surprise that the constructs of their mandate aligns with the Ministry which would have written it. This is an example of institutionalization influencing the discursive moment in a strict way. In a sense, the Committee for the freedom of speech is simply another platform for the Ministry's discourse. In a law proposition to the parliament, the Ministry comments in the same course: «The development of digital and internet-based distribution of news and information have changed [...] the climate for expression and the public»<sup>46</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 6). The Ministry sees both upsides: «On one hand we have been given new and previously unimagined possibilities to gather information, express ourselves and participate»<sup>47</sup>, and downsides: «On the other hand we have got a public which is to a greater degree unedited, and where one not always will have an editor as a filter against for instance hateful expressions, threats, defamations, disinformation, propaganda, conspiracy theories[...]»<sup>48</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 6). They describe how: «In some cases one individual user can now reach just as big an audience as large, established media»<sup>49</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 6). Both the Committee and the Ministry treated here sees challenges concerning the freedom of expression and, as a related problem, disinformation.

Social media is a large focus of the constructs in this category. Kristoffer Egeberg of Faktisk.no is unambiguous about the connection between disinformation and social media: «[The current problem of disinformation and misinformation] is because of social media. There have always been propaganda and fake news, but the possibility to produce and spread fake news is infinitely easier and cheaper today. Anyone can do it»<sup>50</sup> (Revaa, 2020). He is paraphrased in the article: «The algorithms of the large social media-plaforms, that promote emotions and engagement ahead of facts, have according to Egeberg multiplied the spread of disinformation during the last years»<sup>51</sup> (Revaa, 2020). Returning to the communication to the Parliament by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, they begin the subchapter about disinformation by discussing social media: «In light of the sharp increase in usage of social media and changes in people's media habits, as well as the increased opportunities digitization give to communicate and influence through various digital platforms»<sup>52</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 95). Social media and new media habits are constructed as a central context for the problem.

The Norwegian Media Authority have also made statements pointing towards social media. The sentence from their educational resource I already referenced under social causes ended in this way: «[...] fake news-posing articles are spreading, especially in social media»<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> «Samtidig har store globale medieplattformer for opplasting og deling av innhold fått en ny portvokterrolle, [...] Det kan diskuteres om plattformene i visse tilfeller har fått en så dominerende posisjon at deres brukervilkår, algoritmer og moderering fungerer som allmenne rammer for ytringsfriheten»

<sup>46</sup> «Utviklingen av digital og nettbasert formidling av nyheter og informasjon har forandret [...] ytringsklimaet og offentligheten»

<sup>47</sup> «På den ene siden har det gitt oss nye og tidligere uante muligheter for informasjonsinnhenting, ytring og deltakelse»

<sup>48</sup> «På den andre siden har vi fått en offentlighet som i større grad er uredigert, og der man ikke alltid vil ha en redaktør som filter mot for eksempel hatefulle ytringer, trusler, ærekrenkelses, desinformasjon, propaganda, konspirasjonsteorier[...]»

<sup>49</sup> «I en del tilfeller vil én individuell bruker nå et like stort publikum som store, etablerte medier»

<sup>50</sup> «[The current problem of disinformation and misinformation] er på grunn av sosiale medier. Det har alltid vært propaganda og falske nyheter, men muligheten til å produsere og spre falske nyheter er så uendelig mye enklere og billigere i dag. Hvem som helst kan gjøre det»

<sup>51</sup> «Algoritmene til de store sosiale medie-plattformene, som fremmer følelser og engasjement fremfor fakta, har ifølge Egeberg mangedoblet spredningen av desinformasjon de siste årene»

<sup>52</sup> «I lys av den kraftige økningen i bruken av sosiale medier og endringer i folks mediebruk, samt de økte muligheter digitaliseringen gir til å kommunisere og påvirke gjennom ulike digitale plattformer»

<sup>53</sup> «[...] falske nyhetsliknende saker sprer seg, særlig i sosial medier»

(Medietilsynet, nd.). About a study of critical media awareness in the Norwegian population, the Authority told: «We see a much larger share of those who use Youtube daily says they are familiar with fake news than newspaper readers»<sup>54</sup> (Medietilsynet, 2019a: 26). The Norwegian Media Authority explicitly grounds the discursive moment about online disinformation and misinformation in Norway in the moment of survey-research. The interview with Marianne Neraal of Facebook Norway is also a hint at the role of social media, as they were interested in «how their platforms can be abused»<sup>55</sup>, without specifying any hypothesis (NTB, 2020).

A final set of constructs of technical causes mention detailed ways digital technologies can be misused. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training points out that «[...] it is also normal to use software-design to lift fake news articles of interest for certain users and with the purpose of spreading these»<sup>56</sup> (Utdanningsdirektoratet, nd). Roar Thon of NSM underscored that «technological tools» can be used by even individuals to influence opinion (Eliassen, 2019).

## 4.2 Imaginaries of possible futures

To answer the second research question, I have highlighted the ways actors animate through text the futures they envision in relation to online disinformation and misinformation: *How do Norwegian actors envision possible futures for Norway if affected by online disinformation and misinformation?* From the texts in my material, I have selected constructs which connect online disinformation and misinformation with outcomes regarding social order and social life. These can be put in two loose categories. The first category of imaginaries is concerned with the public trust in Norwegian society and stress the impact online disinformation and misinformation might have on the trustworthiness of news media and of the authorities, and on the environment of debates. The second category sees the risks posed to democracy, via Norwegian democratic values and unwanted influence in elections.

### 4.2.1 Public trust at risk

One way my actors perceive public trust to be at risk is in weakening of trust in news media. The educational resource of the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training expresses a fear of this. «In addition to spreading falsities, fake news undermines serious media coverage and the journalists' work of covering real events. Many think it is hard to distinguish fake news from other matters. Thus, the trust in news media and journalists are weakened. Fake news often engages readers and can in this way take the focus away from serious news articles»<sup>57</sup> (Utdanningsdirektoratet, nd.). This represents a worry that misinformation both distracts from actual news and creates confusion of what news are to be trusted. A related concern is found in the mandate of the Committee of the freedom of speech where it is pointed out that the spread of disinformation and misinformation can reduce the credibility of editorial news when it is misleadingly accused of being fake: «At the same time unfounded claims of «fake news» is used as an instrument to weaken trust in critical media, in some countries also to legitimize lawmaking and actions which weaken the freedom of the press»<sup>58</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b).

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<sup>54</sup> «Vi ser at en langt høyere andel av de som bruker Youtube til daglig sier at de har kjennskap til falske nyheter enn daglige papiravislesere»

<sup>55</sup> «hvordan plattformene våre kan misbrukes»

<sup>56</sup> «[...] er det også vanlig med programvaredesign for å løfte frem falske nyhetssaker av interesse for enkelte brukere og med formål å spre disse.»

<sup>57</sup> «I tillegg til å spre usannheter undergraver falske nyheter seriøs mediedekning og journalistenes arbeid med å dekke faktiske hendelser. Mange synes det er vanskelig å skille falske nyheter fra andre saker. Dermed svekkes deres tillit til nyhetsmediene og journalister. Falske nyhetssaker engasjerer ofte leseren og kan dermed ta fokuset bort fra seriøse nyhetssaker»

<sup>58</sup> «Samtidig brukes uberettigede påstander om "falske nyheter" som et virkemiddel for å svekke tilliten til kritiske medier, i enkelte land også til å legitimere lovgivning og tiltak som svekker pressefriheten»

Some actors bring up that support in the authorities too can suffer from online disinformation and misinformation. Ørjan Nordhus Karlsson at DSB proclaimed this view in his interview with the Communications Association: «What makes us worried, is that over time this sort of activity could also weaken the trust we have to each other and the trust we have to the authorities»<sup>59</sup> (Revaa, 2020). The Ministry of Justice and Public Security, of which DSB is subservient, underscore that false information can weaken the authorities' protection of the public: «Disinformation has for many countries been a considerable challenge during the corona pandemic. Such information can weaken society's support and the effect of the authorities' measures, and be a threat to public health»<sup>60</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 95). Roar Thon at NSM thinks trust in the context of crisis is an issue, as he said in an interview in May 2019, before the pandemic: «[NSM's biggest concern] is that there emerges a crisis where people are exposed to information from that many conflicting sources that appear trustworthy, that the authorities cannot reach people with correct information»<sup>61</sup> (Eliassen, 2019). Prime Minister Solberg makes a corresponding point in her blog post months into the pandemic: «Exactly the fact that people in Norway trust each other, have made us able to manage the infections in a good way. There is little help in the Government making recommendations if nobody believes in the authorities. Conspiracy theories are therefore a threat we must take seriously»<sup>62</sup> (Solberg, 2020). These considerations portray diminished trust in the Government as a central fear these actors tie to online disinformation and misinformation, exemplified in how important this is in crisis's.

The Prime Minister also problematizes how conspiracy theories and misinformation can create false divisions between people: «Fake news can create a basis for conspiracy theories, but conspiracy theories can also make grounds for fake news. Together they can cause division and polarization in the population. Discussions and debates emerge based on incorrect claims»<sup>63</sup> (Solberg, 2020). The Ministry of Culture comparably write in their law-proposal that «Common to all these challenges[, including disinformation,] are nevertheless that they to certain degrees affect the infrastructure of expressions and the possibility to lift a diversity of news, information and opinions in an open and healthy debate-environment»<sup>64</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 14). In contrast to trust being valued in order to uphold the integrity of news media and an effective Government, this is the social trust that exists through mutual understanding and which enables constructive debate — a trust online disinformation and misinformation threatens to erode, according to the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Culture.

The common denominator in this set of imaginaries of a future with online disinformation and misinformation is the firm appraisal of, and wishes to retain, public trust. Public trust is held in high esteem whether in the form of trusted media, the Government and its functions or as a quality of the public debate.

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<sup>59</sup> «Det som gjør oss bekymret, er at over tid så vil den typen aktivitet også kunne svekke tilliten vi har til hverandre og tilliten vi har til myndighetene»

<sup>60</sup> «Desinformasjon har for mange land vært en vesentlig utfordring under koronapandemien. Slik informasjon kan svekke samfunnets støtte om og effekten av myndighetenes tiltak, og være en trussel mot folkehelsen.»

<sup>61</sup> «[NSMs største bekymring] er at det oppstår en krise der folk blir utsatt for informasjon fra så mange motstridende kilder som ser troverdige ut, at myndighetene ikke kommer til med korrekte opplysninger»

<sup>62</sup> «Nettopp det at folk i Norge har tillit til hverandre, har gjort at vi har klart å håndtere smitten på en god måte. Det hjelper lite at myndighetene kommer med anbefalinger om ingen tror på myndighetene. Konspirasjonsteoriene er derfor en trussel vi må ta på alvor»

<sup>63</sup> «Falske nyheter kan danne grunnlag for konspirasjonsteorier, men konspirasjonsteorier kan også berede grunnen for falske nyheter. Sammen kan de føre til splittelse og polarisering i befolkningen. Det oppstår diskusjoner og debatter som baserer seg på uriktige påstander»

<sup>64</sup> «Felles for alle disse utfordringene er likevel at de i større eller mindre grad påvirker infrastrukturen for ytringer og muligheten til å få fram et mangfold av nyheter, informasjon og meninger i et åpent og sunt debatt- klima»



## 4.2.2 Democracy at risk

Another category which I found in the data are the imaginaries I take to animate the protection of democracy as an ambition for society. Several of these also mention trust, but as a step towards the larger idea of democracy. Kristoffer Egeberg at Faktisk.no said alarmingly: «This is something the whole society has got to deal with. Because we see a trend that is quite serious — which actually threatens the democracy, threatens the whole public debate. If we do not do something soon, it might be too late»<sup>65</sup> (Revaa, 2020). The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization also saw the problem in relation to democracy in their press release: «Transparency and trust is foundational in our democracy. Over the last years we have seen that influence campaigns and disinformation have drawn more attention in connection with elections in several countries»<sup>66</sup> (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019). The Prime Minister too, warns that democracy could be at risk in her blog post: «The most severe conspiracy theories can represent an egregious danger to individuals, groups of people and our whole democracy, because it impairs one of the most important and finest things we possess in our modern society, namely the trust between people»<sup>67</sup> (Solberg, 2020). The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training also count misinformation as a risk to democracy: «[...] fake news [can] impair people's trust towards the press and established news sources and be a barrier for democracy»<sup>68</sup> (Utdanningsdirektoratet, nd.).

A final set of imaginaries see online disinformation and misinformation principally as means for direct influence of elections. The CEO of AI-company Anyz, Svein Olaf Olsen, encourage action to prevent election interference in an interview with Stavanger Aftenblad: «The trend in other countries show that the democracy must protect itself against disinformation and fake news. If we do not take this seriously, we could be surprised in the parliamentary election in two years. There are naturally groups domestically too who wishes to influence by using technology»<sup>69</sup> (Eliassen, 2019). In their latest threat assessment, the 2021 version, PST sees disinformation as part of tactics that can have powerful consequences for a targeted democracy: «Influence attempts can take different shapes. In Norway certain intelligence officers work purposefully towards people with political influence. The goal is among other things to influence the outcome of individual cases. Foreign intelligence services have been involved in Western countries in spreading disinformation, initiating smear campaigns, as well as spreading rumors or half-truths through social media. Such methods can be effective in everything from influencing single cases or weakening the trust of democratic processes»<sup>70</sup> (PST, 2021).

For the same article as Anyz featured in, the Communications officer in PST, Trond Hugubakken, was interviewed about the threat of disinformation. As a counterpoint to the above imaginaries, he described how Norway could possibly be resilient to such measures:

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<sup>65</sup> « Dette er noe hele samfunnet er nødt til å gjøre noe med. Fordi vi ser en utvikling som er ganske alvorlig - som faktisk truer demokratiet, truer hele samfunnsdebatten. Hvis ikke vi gjør noe snart, så kan det være for sent»

<sup>66</sup> «Åpenhet og tillit er grunnleggende i demokratiet vårt. De siste årene har vi sett at påvirkningskampanjer og desinformasjon har fått mer oppmerksomhet i forbindelse med valg i flere land»

<sup>67</sup> «De mest alvorlige konspirasjonsteoriene kan utgjøre en alvorlig fare for enkeltmennesker, grupper av mennesker og hele vårt demokrati, fordi de svekker noe av det viktigste og fineste vi har i vårt moderne samfunn, nemlig tillit mellom folk»

<sup>68</sup> «falske nyheter [kan] svekke folks tillit til presse og etablerte nyhetskilder og være til hinder for demokratiet»

<sup>69</sup> Utviklingen i andre land viser at demokratiet må forsvare seg mot desinformasjon og falske nyheter. Hvis vi ikke tar dette på alvor, vil vi kunne få overraskelser i stortingsvalget om to år. Det fins naturligvis grupper også her i landet som ønsker å påvirke ved å bruke teknologi, sier Olsen. Han mener årets valg bør brukes til å lære»

<sup>70</sup> «Påvirkningsforsøk kan ta ulike former. I Norge arbeider enkelte etterretningsoffiserer målrettet mot personer som har politisk innflytelse. Formålet er blant annet å påvirke utfallet av enkeltsaker. I vestlige land har fremmede etterretningstjenester også vært involvert i å spre desinformasjon, initiere svertetekampanjer, samt spre rykter eller halvsannheter gjennom sosiale medier. Slike metoder kan være effektive i alt fra å påvirke enkeltsaker til å svekke tilliten til demokratiske prosesser»

«Both our foreign policy and general policies are more consensus-oriented than in a lot of countries. For our foreign policy it does not matter much whether the Conservative Party or the Labour Party have the Government. In some cases, in other countries the political consequences of influencing outcomes can be a lot larger»<sup>71</sup> (Eliassen, 2019).

Together, the majority of these visions make up a sociotechnical imaginary of online disinformation and misinformation as a danger to democracy. The fear for democracy underscores that the actors view it as a cornerstone of Norwegian society. Democracy is perceived threatened both indirectly in loss of transparency and trust, and directly through concrete influence. One of the statements found in my material reversely regards Norway as resilient because of the high consensus in our political landscape.

## 4.3 Interpretations for solving

The third and final research question orientates toward what the actors propose as solutions to online disinformation and misinformation: *How do Norwegian actors propose going about solving online disinformation and misinformation in Norway?* To answer this, I have gathered the statements the selected actors make towards countering the issue. I found that the solutions can be categorized in two categories, according to whether they are orientated towards enhancing human critical abilities and vigilance or utilizing platform capabilities to inform and detect.

### 4.3.1 Hermeneutic solutions

Within the first category of solutions, I found four outlines to potential solutions with varying degrees of specificity. These outlines center around *a strong independent media, a principle of individual responsibility, openness, and critical media awareness*. What they have in common is the focus on the reception of the disinformation and misinformation, not the ways of dissemination. The solutions aim to improve the hermeneutic position of audiences who are exposed to disinformation and misinformation, hence my naming of this category.

The benefits of *a strong and independent media* were advocated for on two occasions. The Ministry of Culture wrote in their law-proposal that: «To facilitate strong and independent media which produce and publish journalistic news of a high quality is the most effective measure against disinformation, hate speech and other threats to free speech»<sup>72</sup> (Kulturdepartementet, 2019: 6). Another incarnation of the Government, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, wrote of the role of the media in their communication to the Parliament: «A good, diverse, independent, critical and self-critical press whom the population trusts is a central part of the protection against fake news and disinformation»<sup>73</sup> (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2019: 96). By both interpreting critical and independent media as a means for solving the problem, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the Ministry of Culture give indication that this could be a relevant social group. A more extensive data gathering would possibly reveal more actors which also relate to the problem in this way.

The *principle of individual responsibility* was the solution with the least degree of specificity among the actors in my material. Three actors made remarks in three different text to this

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<sup>71</sup> «Både vår utenrikspolitikk og generelle politikk er mer konsensus-orientert enn i mange andre land. For utenrikspolitikken betyr det ikke stort om det er Høyre eller Arbeiderpartiet som har regjeringsmakt. I endel andre land kan det få mye større politiske følger å påvirke utfallet»

<sup>72</sup> «Å tilrettelegge for sterke og uavhengige medier som produserer og publiserer journalistikk av høy kvalitet er det mest effektive tiltaket mot desinformasjon, hatefulle ytringer og andre trusler mot ytringsfriheten»

<sup>73</sup> «En god, mangfoldig, uavhengig, kritisk og selvkritisk presse som befolkningen har tillit til er en sentral del av vernet mot falske nyheter og desinformasjon»

end. Senior advisor in DSB, Ørjan Nordhus Karlsson, said: «Each and everyone in Norway plays a role in Norwegian security, against fake news too. That says a bit about the responsibility we hope everyone will consider to take on»<sup>74</sup> (Revaa, 2020). Here he frames the response to online disinformation and misinformation (using the imprecise fake news term) as a matter at everyones table. In her blogpost about conspiracy theories, Prime Minister Solberg also underlined individual responsibility: «We have got to be vigilant, we need to learn to tackle it, and we must understand the mechanisms behind, so that we can reveal the bluff. Here everyone has a responsibility»<sup>75</sup> (Solberg, 2020). In their report on digital risks, NSM writes in an info box titled «Influence and disinformation requires alertness from everybody»: «Important democratic processes can be exposed to influence operations, and we must all be conscious of this risk»<sup>76</sup> (Nasjonal Sikkerhetsmyndighet, 2020: 40). Although being vague about what this means, the report, which is addressed to leaders of organizations and personnel with security tasks, clearly disperses the responsibility to cope with online disinformation to the level of the individual.

The next outline for a solution highlights the role of *openness*. Anders Romarheim at IFS gives a reason why openness is integral: «We are more vulnerable when we are unaware that this is happening. And here it is the population that is targeted»<sup>77</sup> (Skjeseth & Sæther, 2018). The article paraphrases Romarheim on a concrete action: «He suggests the security authorities create an alarm-list with concerning web-personas, accounts and information sources online where one suspects foreign powers to deliberately spread disinformation»<sup>78</sup> (Skjeseth & Sæther, 2018). Roar Thon from NSM commented this: «It is a reasonable suggestion. We increasingly attempt to be open about digital threats and risks. [...] We experience a lack of understanding for what constitutes a normal state and that openness can make this better»<sup>79</sup> (Skjeseth og Sæther, 2018). Both Romarheim and Thon stress that there are however limits to what should be made public, in the name of protecting sources or methods.

To bring attention to the issue among people in political positions, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization distributed information brochures and held seminars ahead of the 2019 local elections (Eliassen, 2019). The brochure was made by the NSM, PST and the Norwegian Intelligence Services and would «contribute to raise the candidates' awareness about unwanted influence, and make the candidates more resilient against this type of influence»<sup>80</sup>. This measure was listed as part of the Governments 'ten actions'. As was the procurement of a research project: «The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization have announced a research assignment about mapping information influence at the 2019 elections»<sup>81</sup> (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019). This assignment was fulfilled by SINTEF, resulting in the report also mentioned in my introduction titled «In search of foreign information influence»<sup>82</sup> (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2020). I take the research assignment to be a step towards openness of the influence, by attempting to

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<sup>74</sup> «Enhver i Norge er en del av Norges beredskap, også mot falske nyheter. Det sier litt om det ansvaret vi håper hver enkelt kan tenke seg å ta»

<sup>75</sup> «Vi må være på vakt, vi er nødt til å lære å håndtere dem, og vi må forstå mekanismene bak, slik at vi kan avsløre bløffen. Her har vi alle et ansvar»

<sup>76</sup> «Viktige demokratiske prosesser kan bli utsatt for påvirkningsoperasjoner, og vi må alle være bevisst denne risikoen»

<sup>77</sup> «Vi blir mer sårbare når vi ikke vet og ikke er bevisste på at dette skjer. Og her er det nettopp befolkningen som er målet»

<sup>78</sup> «Han foreslår at sikkerhetsmyndighetene oppretter en varskuliste med bekymringsverdige nettpersoner, konti og informasjonskilder på nett der en mistenker at fremmede makter bevisst sprer desinformasjon»

<sup>79</sup> «Det er et fornuftig forslag. Vi forsøker i økende grad å være åpne om digitale trusler og risiko. [...] Vi opplever at det er en manglende forståelse av hva normtilstanden er og at åpenhet kan bedre denne»

<sup>80</sup> «skal bidra til å øke listekandidatenes bevissthet om uønsket påvirkning, og gjøre kandidatene bedre rustet til å motstå denne type påvirkning»

<sup>81</sup> «Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet har utlyst et forskningsoppdrag om kartlegging av informasjonspåvirkning ved valget i 2019»

<sup>82</sup> «På leting etter utenlandsk informasjonspåvirkning»

uncover possible attempts. A final interpretation of a solution related to openness is found in the Ministry of Justice and Public Security's communication, where they write of 'attribution' as a central tool. «Understanding and potential responses to disinformation requires the ability to understand who is responsible. Attribution involves identifying and possibly holding to account an actor who have made deliberate actions»<sup>83</sup> (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 96). It is noted that making the step of attribution must be seen in relation to the political context and how secure the knowledge is.

To strengthen people's *critical media awareness* were the most frequent interpretation for solving online disinformation and misinformation among the actors in my field. The Committee for the freedom of speech is bound by their mandate to look at «measures against manipulation of, and weakening of trust to, the public through disinformation, influence campaigns etc. In this context the commission should i.a. discuss efforts to promote resilience and critical media awareness with the audiences»<sup>84</sup> (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 2020b). I have included it here as it, while not excluding the possibility for exploring other measures, expressly mentions critical media awareness as a measure which should be discussed. This interpretation, which assumingly have been written by advisors in the Ministry of Culture for the committee, contributes to stabilizing this as a solution of value. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security agrees on this in their communication. Under the header «efforts against disinformation» several measures are listed, the first being: «Ability for source criticalness. A precondition to counteract disinformation is to be able to consider the author behind and the trustworthiness of the news- and knowledge sources one uses»<sup>85</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 96). No sector of society is exempt: «Developing source criticalness begins in schools, but also has to be developed and maintained in organizations, private businesses, in public agencies and in the individual citizen»<sup>86</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 96).

The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization has likewise shown a belief in critical media awareness against online disinformation and misinformation. In their press release on ten efforts against influence ahead of the 2019 elections, critical media awareness represented two out of the five measures which were directly aimed towards disinformation. Point eight were «The Norwegian Media Authority to carry out a seminar about critical media awareness and fake news»<sup>87</sup>, and point nine were «The Norwegian Media Authority to carry out a campaign about 'How to reveal fake news' in connection with the election of 2019 and a qualitative study about political influence on social media in the context of elections»<sup>88</sup> (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019). Both of these are realized by the Norwegian Media Authority, but also represents the Government's 'ten actions'. In an article on their own website the Director of the Norwegian Media Authority, Mari Velsand, also endorse this solution: «Critical media awareness is the key to be able to understand and use media in an active and conscious manner»<sup>89</sup> (Medietilsynet, 2019b). They initiated a campaign to build such awareness against 'fake news' in partnership with Facebook and Faktisk ahead of the Norwegian Parliamentary elections of 2017 (Medietilsynet, 2017). As part of the campaign, an

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<sup>83</sup> «Forståelse og eventuell imøtegåelse av desinformasjon krever evne til skjønne hvem som står bak. Attribusjon innebærer å identifisere og eventuelt ansvarliggjøre en aktør bak en tilsiktet handling»

<sup>84</sup> «Tiltak mot manipulering av, og svekkelse av tilliten til, det offentlige rom gjennom desinformasjon, påvirkningskampanjer osv. I denne sammenheng bør kommisjonen bl.a. drøfte tiltak for å fremme motstandsdyktighet og kritisk medieforståelse hos publikum»

<sup>85</sup> «Evnen til kildekritikk: En forutsetning for å motvirke desinformasjon er å kunne vurdere avsender bak og troverdigheten til de nyhets- og kunnskapskilder man benytter seg av»

<sup>86</sup> «Å utvikle evnen til kildekritikk begynner i skolen, men den må også utvikles og opprettholdes i organisasjoner, private virksomheter, i offent- lige etater og hos den enkelte borger»

<sup>87</sup> «Medietilsynet gjennomfører seminar om kritisk medieforståelse og falske nyheter»

<sup>88</sup> «Medietilsynet gjennomfører kampanje om "Hvordan avdekke falske nyheter" i forbindelse med valget i 2019 og kvalitativ studie av politisk påvirkning på sosiale medier i forbindelse med valg»

<sup>89</sup> «Kritisk medieforståelse er nøkkelen til å kunne forstå og bruke mediene på en aktiv og bevisst måte»

ad was run in the country's largest newspapers with «tips to reveal fake news online». «We wish to stimulate people to critical thinking to what one sees, hears and consumes of media messages»<sup>90</sup>, was written to explicate the intention (Medietilsynet, 2017). These tips would also become available in the top of people's news feeds on Facebook along with helpful resources, the article informs.

Prime Minister Erna Solberg refers to the Media Authority when she promotes this solution too: «The Norwegian Media Authority offers tips on their websites about what we should do [to limit spread of conspiracy theories]. In short, it is about being critical, [...]»<sup>91</sup> (Solberg, 2020). The tips Solberg indicates is the campaign in which the Authority writes: «Everyone can be fooled by scams or fake news. The information campaign Stop. Think. Check. will contribute to more people being able to expose such»<sup>92</sup> (Medietilsynet, nd.). Another actor already mentioned here which interpret a solution in a similar way is Faktisk.no. Editor Egeberg said «We have got to build source criticalness and competency in the population, so that each and everyone of us becomes better suited to uncover and not let ourselves be fooled, and also to warn each other»<sup>93</sup> (Revaa, 2020).

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security mentioned the role of schools as the starting point for developing these abilities. The actor with schools as their principal field is the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training which resound this in their education resource: «It is important that both private citizens and journalists are critical when facing news and sources. Youth and adults who are to orient themselves in today's media landscape need critical media awareness by: being able to background check sources and other information; understand who might wish to spread fake news and why; and train the ability to expose fake news»<sup>94</sup> (Utdanningsdirektoratet, nd.). Finally, the County Governor of Vestland commits to this in their article about the fact sheet on how to expose fake news. They write for example that: «A vaccine against fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories and internet scams, is to encourage people to be critical to what they read and share on social media»<sup>95</sup> (Stensvand, 2020).

### 4.3.2 Platform solutions

The other category of solutions relates to how digital platforms work, or how they can be used to get the upper hand. In the material I found actors forming around two outlines of platform solutions. The first is about how one can apply *moderation of content* to remove false information and promote trusted sources. The second is about the usage of various *digital tools* to detect disinformation in order to then take appropriate counter actions.

No other actor is in a stronger position to shape the properties of a social media platform than the company behind it. This is the key feature of Facebook Norway's technological frame. In their opinion article from March 2020 the Country Director and Political Chief argued Facebook's case in terms of their efforts against misinformation. In the context of the pandemic they listed their actions, which among others were these: «Removed misinformation

<sup>90</sup> «Vi ønsker å stimulere folk til kritisk tenkning til det man ser, hører og konsumerer av mediebudskap»

<sup>91</sup> «Medietilsynet gir noen tips på sine nettsider om hva vi bør gjøre. Kort og godt handler det om å være kritisk, [...]»

<sup>92</sup> «Vi kan alle bli lurt av svindelforsøk eller falske nyheter. Informasjonskampanjen Stopp. Tenk. Sjekk. skal bidra til at flere klarer å avsløre slike»

<sup>93</sup> «Vi er nødt til å bygge kildekritikk og kompetanse hos befolkningen, sånn at hver og en av oss blir i større grad i stand til å oppdage og ikke la oss lure, og også advare hverandre»

<sup>94</sup> «Det er viktig at både privatpersoner og journalister er kritiske i sitt møte med nyheter og kilder. Unge og voksne som skal orientere seg i dagens nyhetsbilde trenger kritisk medieforståelse ved å: kunne gjøre bakgrunnsjekk av kilder og annen informasjon; forstå hvem som kan ønske å spre falske nyheter og hvorfor; trene evnen til å avsløre falske nyheter»

<sup>95</sup> «Ein vaksine mot falske nyhende, desinformasjon, konspirasjonsteoriar og nettsvindlar, er å oppmode folk om å vere kritiske til det dei les og deler på sosiale medium»

which could pose a danger to people's health, for example false information of how one can combat or cure the infection; [...] we are cooperating with Faktisk.no who contributes by connecting fact checks with controversial content that is spread on the platform, as well as fact checking content which users or Facebook itself report as suspicious»<sup>96</sup> (Neraal & Paulseth, 2020). A second list of actions focus on placement of trustworthy ads and redirection to appropriate sources such as the health authorities. «In Norway we are in close dialogue with the Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI), and we lead people who search for coronavirus on Facebook and Instagram directly to their information portal»<sup>97</sup> (Neraal & Paulseth, 2020).

Their opinion article is a response to the two journalists Bjørn Gunnar Rosvoll and Christian Haneborg, who encouraged businesses to place ads in their newspapers instead of on Facebook. They ended their opinion by saying that: «Continued investment in the global, social networks neither contribute to correct public knowledge or tax incomes for our country»<sup>98</sup> (Rosvoll & Haneborg, 2020). The representatives of Facebook defended their role: «But it would be wrong to solely on the background of [people spreading rumours and bad advice, including on the internet] to conclude that social media is not important in situations such as these»<sup>99</sup> (Neraal & Paulseth, 2020). They also said that: «If there is one thing which is important in times of crisis, then it is that we stand together. The truth is that social media and editorial news media still must function side by side on what they are best at»<sup>100</sup> (Neraal & Paulseth, 2020). This statement could also be read in relation to the stance of the Ministry of Culture cited above; that strong independent media is the most important measure against disinformation. I take Facebook Norway's interpretation of solutions to hold these to more equal value, complimenting each other. In this way it could serve as an example of diverging interpretations for how the response of online disinformation and misinformation should be organized.

Faktisk.no writes of their partnership with Facebook on an information page on their website. They inform that it «involves Faktisk.no getting special tools and functions that also give possibilities for economic support»<sup>101</sup> (faktisk.no, nd.b). This shows that there are certain benefits to the fact-checker collaborating with the platform, both technical and economic, which affects both the quality and reach of the fact-checks. In an article in Aftenposten titled «Faktisk.no starts cooperation with Facebook on fact-checks», Faktisk editor Egeberg said: «This is an exciting partnership. Now both users and we get new tools and functions that make it easier to distinguish fabrication and fact, and notifications when things one shares is fact-checked»<sup>102</sup> (NTB, 2018). He also noted the extent of this solution: «Four out of five Norwegians above the age of 18 has a Facebook-profile, and this collaboration enables us to identify and correct incorrect claims faster»<sup>103</sup> (NTB, 2018). The alliance between Facebook

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<sup>96</sup> «fjernet feilinformasjon som kan utgjøre en fare for folks helse, for eksempel ved å gi feilaktige opplysninger om hvordan man kan bekjempe eller kurere smitten; [...] vi samarbeider med [faktisk.no](https://www.faktisk.no) som bidrar med å knytte faktasjekker til omstridt innhold som spres på plattformen, samt med å faktasjekke innhold som brukere eller Facebook selv rapporterer som mistenkelig»

<sup>97</sup> «I Norge er vi i tett dialog med Helsedirektoratet og Folkehelseinstituttet (FHI), og vi leder folk som søker på coronavirus på Facebook og Instagram direkte til deres informasjonsportal»

<sup>98</sup> «Fortsatt investering i de globale, sosiale nettverkene bidrar verken til korrekt samfunnsinformasjon eller skatteinntekter til landet vårt»

<sup>99</sup> «Men det vil være feil å alene på bakgrunn av [at folk er kilde til rykter og dårlige råd, også på internett] konkludere med at sosiale medier ikke er viktige i situasjoner som dette.»

<sup>100</sup> «Hvis det er en ting som er viktig i kritiske situasjoner, så er det at vi står sammen. Sannheten er at sosiale medier og redaktørstyrte medier fortsatt må fungere side om side på det de er best til»

<sup>101</sup> «Partnerskapet innebærer at [faktisk.no](https://www.faktisk.no) får tilgang til spesielle verktøy og funksjoner som også gir mulighet for økonomisk støtte»

<sup>102</sup> «Nå får både brukerne og vi nye verktøy og funksjoner som gjør det lettere å skille mellom oppspinn og fakta, og varsler når ting man deler er faktasjekket»

<sup>103</sup> «Fire av fem nordmenn over 18 år har en Facebook-profil, og dette samarbeidet gjør at vi forttere kan identifisere og korrigere uriktige påstander»

and Faktisk.no is partly a consequence of their common interpretation of the problem, which is another example of a relevant social group forming on the issue.

A final outline of interpretations of solutions revolves around the usage of *digital tools* to detect online disinformation. The two remaining measures found in the Ministry of Justice and Public Security's communication are related to the digital. They are: «The ability to analyze information flows [...]; Technical competency: A considerable part of disinformation happens in digital spaces. Competencies of how technology is used for disinformation and other influence is crucial»<sup>104</sup> (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2020: 96).

A more specific measure was initiated during the 2017 parliamentary elections, in the form of a contingency-plan against hacking. Roar Thon of NSM said this was still in place around the clock, in an interview from 2019 (Eliassen, 2019). This was also mentioned in the 'ten actions' of the Ministry of Local government and Modernization. Its purpose was substantiated: «The Norwegian National Security Authority established a contingency plan for social media ahead of the elections in 2017. [...] [It] makes it harder to pretend to represent central authorities and Government-profiles on social media»<sup>105</sup> (Kommunal- og Moderniseringsdepartementet).

While this contingency plan is focused on stopping impersonation online, other actors develop solutions more directly focused on false messages. A research project at the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages at the University of Oslo seek to construct a method for «Fake news detection based on linguistic cues» (Alvestad, 2021). The project is based on a hypothesis that «the language of fake news may be the key to its detection» (Alvestad, 2021). A matching approach is taken by the company Anzyz Technologies who claims their artificial intelligence, developed at the University of Agder can quickly expose fake news and disinformation on social media (Eliassen, 2019). CEO Svein Olaf Olsen explains: «We are living in a digital society, and if democracy shall develop itself, it has to follow. Then it will not suffice to use technology that is 50 years old. We are offering a product which can find out if influence campaigns that have happened out in Europe, are happening here too»<sup>106</sup> (Eliassen, 2019).

Olsen expresses disappointment over the lack of support, which he thinks his solution deserves: «There was great enthusiasm when I presented it in the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization. But then nothing happened»<sup>107</sup> (Eliassen, 2019). State Secretary of this Ministry, Hørrigmo, who attended this presentation, replied that they would announce a bid for a research project about influence ahead of the 2019 election. «The project will be announced as a public procurement. Potential offers may suggest usage of artificial intelligence in their project description. The Ministry cannot evaluate the different actors now»<sup>108</sup> (Eliassen, 2019). This could reflect unwillingness toward the usage of this solution. But if we are to take Olsens experience of enthusiasm for granted, it may also be attributed to the established processes, or technological frame, that the Ministry has to keep with when deliberating their actions. Another barrier to using such tools for detecting disinformation is

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<sup>104</sup> «Evnen til å analysere informasjonsstrømmer [...]; Teknologisk kompetanse: En vesentlig del av desinformasjon skjer i det digitale rom. Kompetanse om hvordan teknologi brukes til desinformasjon og annen påvirkning er avgjørende»

<sup>105</sup> «Nasjonal sikkerhetsmyndighet etablerte før valget i 2017 en beredskapstjeneste for sosiale medier. [...] [Det] gjør det vanskeligere å utgi seg for å være representanter for sentrale myndigheter og myndighetspersoner på sosiale medier»

<sup>106</sup> «Vi lever i et digitalt samfunn, og hvis demokratiet skal utvikle seg, må det følge med. Da nytter det ikke å bruke teknologi som er 50 år gammel. Vi tilbyr et produkt som kan finne ut om påvirkningskampanjer som har skjedd ute i Europa, også skjer her»

<sup>107</sup> «Det var stor entusiasme da jeg viste det i kommunaldepartementet. Siden skjedde det ingenting»

<sup>108</sup> «Prosjektet vil bli lyst ut som en offentlig anskaffelse. Eventuelle tilbydere kan foreslå bruk av kunstig intelligens i sin løsningsbeskrivelse. Departementet kan ikke vurdere de ulike aktørene nå»

privacy. Chief of communications at PST, Hugubakken, explains why they have not been able to: «In Norway PST is interested in exposing concealed influence of political questions. But PST does not use artificial intelligence or big data, because it among other things collides with the consideration for privacy»<sup>109</sup> (Eliassen, 2019).

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<sup>109</sup> «I Norge er PST interessert i å avdekke fordekt påvirkning av politiske spørsmål. Men PST bruker ikke kunstig intelligens eller stordata, blant annet fordi det kolliderer med hensynet til personvern»



## 5. Analysis

The previous chapter represents the constructs of online disinformation and misinformation by the Norwegian actors in my material. In this chapter I analyze and make further sense of these in light of the relevant theories and perspectives introduced earlier.

### 5.1 The social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway

My observations of the actors' statements on the causes of, futures with and solutions to online disinformation and misinformation in Norway reveal how this phenomenon is in a process of social construction.

To the query of *what causes of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway do Norwegian actors perceive?*, the actors generally brought up both social and technical causes. The constructs of social causes, although varying in terms of specificity and in whether responsible parties were identified, were quite uniform. Political influence was almost universally presented as a motive to produce online disinformation, if the mentioning of political entities such as Russia or foreign states is counted as such. The Norwegian Media Authority was however mute on motives and agitators, mentioning only the information-demand in a situation of crisis as a contributing social factor. Economic motives were a less prominent motive among my actors in the field and constructed with less specificity. Emotions were mentioned by two actors to explain the increase in online disinformation and misinformation, as people are more likely to share dubious information if it makes them angry or proud.

As a natural variable, emotions could have been exploited in disinformation and misinformation before the internet. Egeberg at Faktisk.no claims that they are more effectively leveraged through the algorithms of social media platforms. The constructed technical causes overall relate to properties associated with the internet and with digital platforms. Some actors only refer to 'the internet', 'digitization' and 'social media platforms', while others specify attributes like 'the lack of filters', 'user-targeting' and 'echo chambers'. Others take a middle ground of specificity by naming 'software-design' and 'technological tools' as stimulants. Together these constructs establish technical causes as an important feature of the discourse of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway, and almost as widespread as the social causes. The difference between specifying these causes in detail and merely naming them, is the clarity of the transitivity they refer to. There is for example a significant difference between Facebook Norway affirming that their platform can be abused, as opposed to specifying the properties which make them exploitable. To this end, for example Prime Minister Solberg's addressing of echo-chambers and Kristoffer Egeberg at Faktisk.no's blaming of algorithms are much more useful for developing solutions.

Notably, there were five actors who only mentioned social causes. These five were the Directorate for Civil Protection, the National Police Directorate, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, PST and the County Governor of Vestland. Their constructs of social causes not conforming more to each other than to others. Comparing with their imaginaries of futures and interpretations of solutions there are not any striking similarities there either. This can serve as a clue that the actors' constructed causes might be less relevant for the other dimensions. It could also mean that these actors are concerned with technical causes too, but just not in my material. The material where their causes were constructed consisted of interview articles, press releases, as well as PST's threat assessments. None of these communicative situations should by my judgement leave technical

causes irrelevant. Looking at another 'moment' of these actors' social practices with online disinformation and misinformation we find that they are all public institutions, but so are many of the other actors mentioning technical causes. I will not draw any conclusions for why these five actors do not construct technical causes.

The normative conceptions found when enquiring into *how Norwegian actors envision possible futures for Norway if affected by online disinformation and misinformation?*, were highly harmonious. I categorized them as imaginaries of risk to public trust and to democracy. The principal distinction between these lies in whether the idea of 'democracy' is made relevant or not. The first category highlighted diminished trust as the most concerning effect of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway. This was manifested as trust in critical news media for the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training and the Committee for the freedom of speech. The Norwegian National Security Authority emphasized the confusion that emerges when conflicting information sources appear equally trustworthy. Prime Minister Solberg focused on social trust within the population. As did DSB but adding trust in authorities as well. Finally, PST foregrounded trust in democratic processes as a value at risk in a future where online disinformation and misinformation has grown as a problem. This makes trust the most high-regarded value to protect against online disinformation and misinformation in Norway among my actors in the field.

The second category expressed a fear for the integrity of the democratic regime, in large part via the threat to the first one. PST, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, the Prime Minister and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training saw weakened trust as a barrier for democracy. Egeberg at Faktisk claimed strongly that the problem threatens democracy and public debate, not specifying how exactly. More concretely, three actors imagined influence in elections as a direct threat to Norway's democratic integrity. These were the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, PST and Anzyz. Hugubakken at PST stated however, reassuringly, that the consensus-oriented politics in Norway make influencing Norwegian elections less feasible than in other more politically divided countries.

Compared to the rest of the actors present in this dimension, the three actors focusing on direct influence in elections are anomalies. Looking back at the constructs of causes, their social causes do not stand out — political influence was widely featured in the material. Anzyz was not present in the causes-dimension, but the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization and PST both did not remark any technical causes in my material. Conversely, among the actors who had not written about direct influence in elections, only DSB did not mention technical causes. One interpretation of this is that social causes were relatively more important than technical causes for the actors who believe online disinformation could be successfully employed for direct influence of elections, and in this way undermine democracy. It does not mean that they believe the disinformation would not be disseminated with technical means, just that this is not the most crucial factor. To back this up we only have to ascertain that they interpreted technical solutions. For the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization these included a contingency plan against hacking of profiles and artificial intelligence as a possible solution (if achieving a successful bid on a procurement), while PST pointed to privacy as a barrier to their usage of artificial intelligence.

For the question of *how do Norwegian actors propose going about solving online disinformation and misinformation in Norway?*, I found actions the actors' proposed to mitigate the issue. I created two categories, according to whether the solutions orient toward the hermeneutic position of actors or the modification of platforms. The hermeneutic solutions assist the audiences in recognizing verifiable information from the made up. There is a sizeable skew among my actors toward hermeneutic solutions over platform solutions, with a 13 to eight

difference in recorded observations. Most of the interpretations of solutions are compatible, but some show elements of mismatch with each other. The cases in which solutions are incompatible are especially suited to illuminate the significance of social processes in the shaping of outcomes.

The most often proposed solution was to encourage and educate citizens in critical media awareness. A total of ten actors advocated this solution. This is also the one which most directly improves the hermeneutic position of audiences exposed to online disinformation and misinformation. The hermeneutic position is sought improved by enhancing the audiences' ability to distinguish the authentic and verified from the made up or misunderstood. The concrete means to achieve this were campaigns to promote critical thinking in the general public, resources to be used in schools, seminars and development in other sectors of society. The very clear support for this solution is an indication that it is well established and stabilized as an interpretation for solving online disinformation and misinformation in Norway.

In the hermeneutic solutions category, this outline to a solution was joined by interpretations focused on a strong and independent media, the principle of individual responsibility and openness. A strong and independent media can contribute to the hermeneutic position of audiences by being an information counterweight to the editor-lacking digital platforms. When audiences come across doubtful information, critical media function as a reference point to be trusted. Two actors put high priority on this solution. The principle of individual responsibility is a close ally of the critical media awareness solution. Audiences must be willing to subject themselves to the advice from actors who encourage criticalness. Learning to be critical requires effort, as opposed to just keeping on scrolling, and three actors express an expectation that people will take this responsibility. Finally, the openness solution is a hermeneutic solution by virtue of informing the public and was raised by five actors. It is easier to be critical of messages if you have an idea in advance of what kind of topics, motives or authors might be implied in the online disinformation and misinformation circulating. A good understanding of these is integral to the openness solution, which can also make holding responsible parties accountable possible.

The platform solutions embed countermeasures into the production side of online disinformation and misinformation. According to the actors in my field, this can be carried out by moderating content and its presentation, or with more advanced technical implementations such as artificial intelligence detection. The moderation of content solution included connecting disputed content on social media platforms with factchecking articles and reliable sources. The benefit of this is that reliable information is available to the audience who then will not have to actively seek it out themselves. This is done in collaboration with relevant authorities, such as FHI when it comes to information on the COVID-19 pandemic. In other cases, the institutionalized authority of knowledge might not be as obvious, but editorial fact-checkers such as Faktisk.no can serve the purpose. As was stated in the introduction, Faktisk.no is a collaboration between several established news media in Norway. The fact-checking articles which are linked on Facebook, represents in this sense an alliance between the independent editorial media and the social media platforms.

However, the relation between editorial, and social, media is also a site of tension in the statements from the actors in my field. One hint of this is in the diverging interpretations of solutions. The Ministry of Culture appraised strong and independent media as the most effective measure against disinformation. An even more clearly partial position was taken by the two journalists Rosvoll and Haneborg who advocated a boycott of ads on social media platforms. Facebook Norway expressed a more balanced interpretation, promoting cooperation between the two media providers. Another sign of tension lies in the relation between the

constructed causes and interpreted solutions of Egeberg at Faktisk.no. On one hand, he blames social media and its algorithms as a predominant cause of the increased spread of disinformation. On the other, he sees Faktisk's partnership with Facebook as exciting. There are several arguments for why this is reasonable, including the opportunity to reach 80% of Norwegians above 18 with fact-checks and access to tools which expose false information quickly. Simultaneously, the partnership transparently provides Faktisk.no with funding for contributing fact-checks and Facebook with the legitimacy of Faktisk's editorial basis. The tension here is resolved if Egeberg believes the fact-checks they produce mitigate the effect of social media on the spread of disinformation. This also means that he blames the properties and design of social media for the increased spread of disinformation, rather than social media per se. On the path towards limiting the spread of online disinformation and misinformation, Faktisk's fact-checks are also an involvement in the social construction of the social media platform.

One outline of solutions observed pointed towards using digital tools to counter online disinformation in Norway. These included anti-hacking contingency plans, competency on relevant technologies, analysis of information and artificial intelligence. The first of these were uncontroversial and had been in place since the 2017 Norwegian parliamentary elections. Some statements on analyzing information were vague, but the research project at University of Oslo set out to explore if linguistic cues could be harnessed. This method relates to the interpretation of Anzyz, who advertised their artificial intelligence solution as a way to protect democracy against foreign influence. When interviewed, CEO of Anzyz, Svein Olaf Olsen, was surprised at the lack of approval his product had been met with. The comments by State Secretary Horrigmo indicated that it was a question of following the Ministry's procedures when deciding on solutions. I have not investigated whether Anzyz did make a bid of their services. The issue of privacy in artificial intelligence programs was brought up by the Chief of communications at PST, Hugubakken. Anzyz's solution can be understood to have fallen short in a process where heterogeneous engineering was not properly considered. Even if the claims of an effective solution are correct, their technical solution cannot be used for countering online disinformation and misinformation in Norway without taking the social and cultural context into account. The social barriers and lack of support for this solution is also an indication that it could be discarded as an interpretation for how to solve the problem. Instead, the process of social construction closes in on the other accepted solutions.

## **5.2 The co-production of trust and online disinformation and misinformation in Norway**

The social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway can be understood as a process of co-production between technology and society. My argument is that trust figures as a focal point for how Norwegian actors relate to the issue, by way of their constructs of causes, imaginaries of futures and interpretations of solutions. Trust emerges as a co-productive counterpoint to the spread of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway.

Trust of various kinds have been found to repel the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Humprecht et al. explored the conditions for resilience against online disinformation. The resilience framework encompassed complex, largely ungovernable sociological measurements, like the degree of polarization, the size of the ad market and the rate of social media usage to name a few. The extent of trust in news was one which was independently statistically significant, and which came up in my material of the sociotechnical imaginaries. Astapova et al. also underscored the preventive effect of social and political trust. Although Norway have relatively high social and political trust, and scores high in the resilience

framework, the level of trust can be regarded as part of what enables online disinformation and misinformation to spread.

Given this, the ways trust was thematized by the Norwegian actors in my material were striking. The most explicit ways were in the sociotechnical imaginaries of possible futures with online disinformation and misinformation. Even though roughly half of the actors saw democracy as the ultimate value at stake, this was mostly by way of a decrease in trust. The spread of online disinformation and misinformation was associated with diminished trust in critical news media, confusion of trust between conflicting sources, erosion of trust in one's fellow citizens and authorities, as well as in democratic processes. Maintaining this trust is at the center of the actors' normative commitment to counter the threat of online disinformation and misinformation.

The discursive constructs of causes also relate to trust, but in the form of its opposite, distrust. Nearly all the actors recorded in this dimension indicate political influence as the cause of online disinformation and misinformation. This is interesting because it expresses a distrust of (mainly) external actors who are perceived to have malicious intents against Norway's political systems. As noted in the previous section, five actors disregarded technical causes in my material. This tipped the weight towards social causes, which is where the most responsibility for the issue was dealt in my material. Irrespective of whether this distrust is justifiable, it rhymes with the culture of Norway (as a Nordic country) where outsiders are met with skepticism. The social and political trust we wish to sustain is not bestowed upon foreign states who may seek to impose their interests in Norway's politics.

Finally, trust is a vital ingredient to solutions interpreted by most of the Norwegian actors in my field. My argument is that the most frequently interpreted solutions to online disinformation and misinformation are made possible by a firm trust in citizens to apply themselves for the same cause. This is most apparent in what I termed the *principle of individual responsibility* solution. The actors who advocate this principle, simultaneously express confidence in individuals to be willing and able to fulfill this. The training of *critical media awareness* solution is a method towards supporting and enabling individuals to take the responsibility. Therefore, this solution builds on the same principle and a sense of trust in citizens to be capable and accepting of the purpose. The other two outlines of hermeneutic solutions, *a strong and independent media*, and *openness*, can assist citizens in their reception of information by demonstrating source criticalness in practice and informing of claims to be extra vigilant against when consuming information. The way individuals are trusted by the actors in my material, seem to indicate that social trust and trust in the political systems are not the only types of trust that are high in Norway. There is also a trust in the public by authorities and other actors in society.

Trust is however also required to make the interpreted platform solutions effective. By presenting audiences who are exposed to suspicious or controversial content with trusted sources and fact-checking articles, these audiences are being guided towards verified information. The content is moderated for them, ideally resulting in everyone being well-informed. Yet, the audience still need to trust these sources more than the potential disinformation they are exposed to. This is equivalent to the resilience dimension of trust in news media. Some platform solutions seem to fail due to a lack of trust. The privacy concerns of artificial intelligence is an example of this. Another solution which requires trust is censorship of online disinformation and misinformation. Misplaced or deliberately misused censorship, could result in dramatically reduced trust in authorities.

There is a co-productive process between trust and online disinformation and misinformation in Norway because trust permeates the relations of society with the issue. An analytical delineation of this co-production can be set to start when online disinformation and misinformation exploits gaps of trust in society to spread more easily. The Norwegian actors react by expressing that the social and political trust in society is threatened further. The actors succeedingly mobilize trust in the solutions. Authorities show trust in individuals through hermeneutic solutions and ask for it in return in platform solutions. If successful in the ways the actors hope for, trust is sustained or perhaps made even more robust. This could strengthen the resilience of Norway, leaving a harsher environment for online disinformation and misinformation to spread in. If unsuccessful, and the actors' sociotechnical imaginaries of potential futures are realized, the resilience is potentially weakened, increasing society's vulnerability. In either case, the trust in Norwegian society and the spread of online disinformation and misinformation is diametrically co-produced.

### **5.3 Mediated authenticity and online disinformation and misinformation in Norway**

The social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is a process where various actors in Norwegian society interpret the issue differently. The actors' interpretations toward what solutions should be put forward will lead to concrete actions. One way to interpret the outcome from these solutions is through the lens of mediated authenticity.

Trusting a text to be true can be understood as accepting the text's authenticity. Seen with Gunn Enli's theory of mediated authenticity, authenticity is negotiated between producers, audiences and regulators in a symbolic contract. When logging on to social media platforms, audiences bring with them certain expectations they wish fulfilled to accept the authenticity of messages. These expectations are comparable to their hermeneutical abilities. Audiences interpret new messages based on their previous knowledge and experience. On social media platforms without editorial filters, audiences will for example read posts written by people and pages they follow. They can also partake in groups which cover their interests or opinions. This can lead to what Prime Minister Solberg refers to as echo-chambers, where information and opinions are spread without counterarguments available, thus reinforcing the belief.

Such cases represent inconsistencies in the authenticity contract. Perhaps both audiences and producers within a closed group are on the same terms, but regulators and others who fear the consequences of misinformation are not. The spread of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway have in this and other ways become an authenticity scandal. Various segments of society have reacted, including factcheckers, defense authorities, and the general public, among which 61% reported that they had encountered doubtful information throughout the previous year according to the Norwegian Media Authorities (Medietilsynet, 2021: 5). The selected actors in this thesis engage in social construction to resolve the scandal.

Resolving the scandal is achieved with a re-negotiated authenticity contract between producers, audiences and regulators. On the internet, everyone is potentially both producers of, and audiences to, information. The actors interpreting solutions function as regulators when implementing countermeasures. Some of the platform solutions, such as contingency plans against hacking, moderating false information and embedding fact-checking of disputed statements regulate the production-end of authenticity. They assist in ensuring that more of the information that reaches audiences are authentic.

On the audience-end of authenticity, regulators apply hermeneutic solutions. They encourage and train individuals in critical media awareness, promote editorial media and inform of topics

vulnerable for influence. If audiences do practice more critical media awareness, this is another way that producers of information will be held to account in the new authenticity contract. Either producers meet the audiences' expectations, or their messages will be regarded as inauthentic, and critical audiences will look elsewhere. In addition, audiences can choose to accept or reject the platform solutions based on whether they are deemed trustworthy. If solutions are mutually accepted and successful in limiting online disinformation and misinformation, it would constitute a renewed authenticity contract.

## 6. Conclusions and discussion

I have now presented how the actors construct the issue in terms of likely causes, possible futures and potential solutions. These have been altogether analyzed in light of the relevant theories and perspectives introduced, to reach my conclusions. In this chapter I sum up these and discuss the societal implications, as well as towards what respects future research is warranted. I end the thesis with a reflection on the value of critical media awareness as a solution to the problem of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway.

### 6.1 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to answer: *How is online disinformation and misinformation in Norway being constructed by actors in Norwegian society?* The constructs of causes to online disinformation and misinformation constitute the actors' perceptions of inducing elements. The sociotechnical imaginaries embody the normative beliefs the actors assert in relation to the issue. The final dimension in my material, interpretations for how to solve online disinformation and misinformation in Norway, represent the social construction of solutions. Together, these give an account of how online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is being constructed by actors in Norwegian society. I conclude that the central characteristic of this process is that it is thoroughly social and made up of a range of different discourses, imaginaries and interpretations.

The social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway combines a variety of views, concerns and propositions, where some are more prominent than others. In terms of causes, both social and technical ones were constructed, but the social more frequently. The most constructed social cause was political influence as a general motive or in the form of identifying parties with interest in influencing politics. Economic motives are also seen as instigating, as well as circumstances of crisis, and emotions. The technical causes constructed consisted of various characterizations of the internet, digitization and social media platforms. Compared to other mediums, these are perceived as gateways for disinformation and misinformation because of the lack of editorial filters, algorithms that elevate strong emotional messages and create echo chambers, and the possibility to abuse technical tools to target specific users.

The sociotechnical imaginaries expressed by the actors centered on the threat to trust in society. The description of trust varied, and included the social and interpersonal trust, the political trust in electoral systems, trust in the press and trust in the authorities. Some actors saw erosion of trust as a threat to democracy and some feared direct influence in Norway's democratic elections.

The solutions interpreted by the actors fit into two categories. The hermeneutic solutions can serve to strengthen the reception of audiences. One way to do this is by ensuring strong and independent media which audiences can rely on for critical journalism. Another measure is for authorities to be open about the intelligence they have on possible disinformation campaigns and likely targets. Hermeneutic solutions require audiences to be willing and able to take on the responsibility of being critical. Some actors stress an expectation of this, encouraging everyone to do their part. The training of critical media awareness is proposed for improving audiences' abilities in discerning true from false when going online, and was the solution with the most support.

The platform solutions are intended to limit the amount of disinformation and misinformation presented to audiences. Content is moderated by removing what goes against the individual



platform's terms and by connecting it to independent fact-checking articles. Audiences are also referred to authoritative sources when coming across posts about contentious topics. The partnership between fact-checkers and social media platforms represents an alliance between the editorial and the social media. Some of the interpreted platform solutions utilize more technically advanced means. Monitoring against hacking of profiles, and research of whether linguistic cues can help detect disinformation is ongoing. The proposal to use artificial intelligence solutions to reveal disinformation met institutional barriers as it had to be applied with in a regular procurement like other solutions, and collides with privacy concerns.

The social construction presented above reveals trust to stand in a co-productive relationship with online disinformation and misinformation in Norway. Social and political trust is assumed to strengthen resilience of society to the issue. Reversely, lack of trust could be a condition for vulnerability. If the actors' normative expectations of a future with increased spread of online disinformation and misinformation are justified, trust within Norwegian society could suffer. In response, the actors in my material mobilize trust in several ways. They place trust in individuals to fulfill the expectation of practicing critical media awareness. They request trust from individuals when moderating content, presenting authoritative sources and fact-checking articles. If online disinformation and misinformation spreads further, such solutions could become less feasible. However, if solutions are successful, sustained trust creates further resilience. In this way trust and online disinformation and misinformation in Norway are in a process of co-production.

The social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway is also an attempt at restoring the authenticity contract between producers, audiences and regulators. The actors in this thesis present possible ways to regulate the issue. The platform solutions regulate the production and presentation of information, while the hermeneutic solutions are regulations of the reception. The audiences negotiate the contract through holding producers accountable by exercising critical media awareness and regulators by accepting or rejecting their authoritative platform solutions. The authenticity contract is restored if each party's expectations are perceived met and online disinformation and misinformation is acceptably limited.

## **6.2 Discussion**

This thesis has shown that different actors in the Norwegian society contribute to the social construction of online disinformation and misinformation in different ways. The answer to Durach et al.'s questions for policy makers and regulatory bodies are not given. The social construction of the problem can hopefully result in better answers than any one actor can on their own. The responsibility of online disinformation and misinformation in Norway lies in both technical and social structures, according to the Norwegian actors. The aspects to target in order to mitigate it lie with the audience and with the platforms. How digital platforms should be regulated is a larger question, but the solutions in this thesis reveal some ways authorities and platforms can work together.

The findings of this thesis offer a broad overview of the ways Norwegian actors relate to online disinformation and misinformation in open sources, such as news articles and reports. They can be used to gain an understanding of the field and the relations between the different aspects of the problem, including causes, concerns and solutions. The issue has not been too widespread in Norway at this time, but actors indicate that it could be on the rise. While some studies have explored how the EU regulates the issue (Durach et al., 2020), or what solutions are available in general (Kalsnes, 2019: 128), the ongoing processes of constructing solutions in the Norwegian society also needs attention. In this way the findings of the thesis should be

able to inform actors involved in countering online disinformation and misinformation in Norway or elsewhere.

One could have written a master's thesis for each of the solutions that was brought up in this one. Verifying the effectiveness of measures being implemented is important, and I believe more research should be dedicated to this and to how they should best be designed. Each solution is also on its own subject to a process of social construction. Combating online disinformation and misinformation effectively could be crucial to preserve a healthy public debate and democracy. There is moreover no clear line for when we have 'enough' critical media awareness, for example. Our public debate and deliberative democracy can always be improved, also in the state it is today.

A question could be posed to whether the trust authorities have in audiences to improve their critical media awareness is deserved. There is little value in encouraging individual responsibility if people can be easily fooled by false narratives and conspiracy theories. The training of critical media awareness is set to take place in schools, businesses and through ad-campaigns if the suggested solutions are implemented. It is impossible to know if this training will suffice and, to borrow the metaphor used by the County Governor of Vestland, be an effective vaccine. But unlike platform solutions, which can be reversed or hacked in an instance, critical media awareness belongs to each one who learns it and practices it. Critical thinking can be adapted to new mediums where there are new ways to represent authenticity. Not only does this solution demonstrate that the authorities trust individuals, but it also provides individuals with the tools to trust themselves in an increasingly chaotic information environment. This trust is in some sense also reciprocated by the citizens when they approve of the regulators' platform solutions, such as moderation of content, fact-checking and linked authoritative sources.

A closing analogy can help make clear the importance of critical media awareness and how this also can build and individual's trust in themselves. The way society orders the reception of information can be compared to how it orders navigation for people hiking in the woods. When you walk into an unfamiliar forest, you can depend on several elements to find your way. These require various levels of ability and effort. You have a sense of direction, assisted by the grid cells in your brain. These help to steer you towards your goal, even when the trail twists and turns. Perhaps you have even brought a compass, which will, when working properly, guide you in a consistent direction. If you brought a map of this forest, and have learnt how to read it, you can even know where you are, and where each available path leads. Directional signs will also help, so you do not have to look at the map at every turn. If you even brought a GPS, the route to your destination can be laid out for you in full, with no additional reflection required.

The way we navigate in a forest is in this sense a lot like how we navigate information. Your sense of direction corresponds to your intuitive judgement of a statement's truth-value. Some statements are easier to judge, such as «pigs can fly», while others are less intuitively obvious, like «rapid climate change is man-made». To statements of the latter kind, we can apply our reason and look for authoritative sources, such as editorial news. These are, respectively, much like a compass and a map, which are crucial in a dense forest with a myriad of trails where the right direction is not apparent. Coming across a social media post about a controversial topic, likens standing at a junction of paths. The social media platform linking to trusted sources matches the setting up of a signpost for the alternative directions. Furthermore, depending on GPS satellite technologies to know where to go, is the equivalent of trusting the authorities to apply censorship appropriately.

The problem arises when the GPS malfunctions or is sabotaged. If there are no signposts at the crossroads or you even find yourself with off the trail. At that point you are dependent on critical media awareness. Looking at the map (reading the papers), holding up the compass (evaluating the arguments), and even exercising a directional sense («why would he discount the election?»), are all important strategies to avoid getting lost in the woods, and in between true and false. And this is what critical media awareness means.

Ultimately, if one manages to get lost in information and terrain simultaneously, one could end up believing that the earth is flat.

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