Review

Who Believes in Fake News? Identification of Political (A)Symmetries

João Pedro Baptista 1,2,* and Anabela Gradim 2,3

1 Department of Letters, Arts and Communication, University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD), 5000-801 Vila Real, Portugal
2 Labcom.IFP—Communication and Arts, University of Beira Interior (UBI), 6201-001 Covilhã, Portugal
3 Department of Communication, Philosophy and Politics, University of Beira Interior (UBI), 6201-001 Covilhã, Portugal
* Correspondence: joao.pedro.baptista@ubi.pt

Abstract: Political fake news continues to be a threat to contemporary societies, negatively affecting public and democratic institutions. The literature has identified political bias as one of the main predictors of belief and spread of fake news. However, the academic debate has not been consensual regarding the effect of political identity on the discernment of fake news. This systematic literature review (2017–2021) seeks to understand whether there is consistent evidence that one political identity may be more vulnerable to fake news than others. Focusing the analysis on European and North American (United States) studies, we used Scopus and Web of Science databases to examine the literature. Our findings revealed that most studies are consistent in identifying the conservative or right-wing audience as more vulnerable to fake news. Although there seems to be a motivated political reasoning for both sides, left-wing people or liberals were not, in any analyzed study, associated with a greater propensity to believe in political fake news. Motivated reasoning seems stronger and more active among conservatives, both in the United States and Europe. Our study reinforces the need to intensify the fight against the proliferation of fake news among the most conservative, populist, and radical right audience.

Keywords: fake news; disinformation; political ideology; political bias

1. Introduction

Fake news is considered a kind of online disinformation, “with misleading and/or false statements [. . . ] intentionally created to mislead and/or manipulate, through the appearance of a news format with an opportunistic structure [. . . ] to attract the reader’s attention” with the objective of obtaining an ideological or financial gain (Baptista and Gradim 2022a, p. 10). The spread of fake news or other types of disinformation has never been as dangerous as it is today. The sharing of fake news on social media had strong social and political repercussions during the 2016 US presidential election. Several journalistic investigations denounced a number of hyperpartisan websites that spread pro-Trump fake news. This fake news reached millions of comments, reactions and shares on social media (Silverman 2016; Silverman and Alexander 2016; Silverman et al. 2016; Subramanian 2017). Also in Europe, the proliferation of disinformation has contributed to the rise of radical populist movements and parties (Zimmermann and Kohring 2020; Mancosu et al. 2017). Fake news has become a constant threat to democracy and journalism due to its omnipresence in national and international election campaigns (Baptista and Gradim 2022a; Pieri et al. 2020; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020) and the way in which it attacks traditional media (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). With the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequences of disinformation became more severe, undermining the audience’s trust in health and scientific authorities (Pian et al. 2021). The recent outbreak of war in Europe,
with Russia invading Ukraine, has increased the proliferation of fake news and other types of disinformation, seeking to manipulate public opinion’s perception of the conflict.

However, some studies argue that the problem of fake news may have been viewed with alarmism, stating that its audience may not be as large as thought. The fake news audience seems to correspond to a small and specific percentage of readers (Dubois and Blank 2018; Fletcher et al. 2018; Guess et al. 2019; Nelson and Taneja 2018). Still, this does not mean that the problem of fake news should be devalued.

Given this political context, we consider it extremely important to study the effect of political identities on the belief and dissemination of fake news. A comprehensive review on the influence of political and partisan lenses on the selection and consumption of information (Shin and Thorson 2017; Thorson 2016; Grady et al. 2021) is still lacking. It has long been known that individuals are more likely to accept information consistent with their political, social, or religious values and to reject, avoid, or counter-argue information incompatible with their pre-existing beliefs (Taber and Lodge 2006; Nickerson 1998). In a post-truth era (see McIntyre 2018) and in the current media ecosystem, strong partisan bias can promote political polarization, motivating the creation, in social media, of hyperpartisan groups, where politically aligned false content can be more easily accepted (Barnidge et al. 2020; Osmundsen et al. 2021).

This study is a systematic literature review with the objective to understand whether there is consistent evidence about political identity (conservatives or right-wing people vs. liberals or left-wing people) turning subjects more vulnerable to fake news. Specifically, this review intends to understand whether the literature reveals specific political identity as a predictor of belief in fake news, considering European and North American (United States) realities. Are the findings of the literature consistent regarding political ideology in both contexts? Is there a political symmetry or asymmetry in relation to the belief in fake news? What are the findings of the literature and what arguments are in force?

These are the main research questions that motivated the development of our study.

2. Believing in Fake News

Who believes in fake news? Since the 2016 US elections, with the worsening of the dissemination of disinformation as a political weapon, the academy has gathered efforts to understand what motivates the consumption and spread of fake news. Academic debate discusses a number of factors that can affect the ability to discern fake news from real news.

First, some studies have shown that belief in fake news may be dependent on factors related to individual personality (Talwar et al. 2019; Calvillo et al. 2021a; Szebeni et al. 2021). Other studies have already reported that personality can influence judgment and decision-making in a variety of situations (Byrne et al. 2015). While Szebeni et al. (2021) have shown that a propensity for a conspiratorial mindset can make people more vulnerable to misinformation, other studies (Wolverton and Stevens 2019; Sindermann et al. 2020; Calvillo et al. 2021a) seem to agree that extraversion is related to belief in fake news. While Talwar et al. (2019) explains that sharing and engaging with fake news can be associated with the social anxiety of people feeling connected and included (known as Fear of Missing Out—FOMO), on the other hand, Szebeni et al. (2021) revealed that the conspiratorial mindset is a strong predictor of belief, surpassing political or ideological motivation. In addition to factors associated with personality, belief in fake news can also be associated with emotion (Martel et al. 2020), involvement with political news (Grinberg et al. 2019), distrust in traditional media (Bennett and Livingston 2018; van der Linden et al. 2020a) or to a higher level of political discontent (Petersen et al. 2020). In sociodemographic terms, the literature is consensual in considering older and less educated people to be more vulnerable to fake news (Brashier and Schacter 2020; Guess et al. 2019; Baptista et al. 2021a). Differences between people’s genders do not seem significant (Baptista et al. 2021a). Inoculation theory (see McGuire 1964) can help to understand the importance of digital literacy in combating disinformation. Individuals can be “inoculated” against fake news through prior exposure (such as training and/or digital education) to the strategies and practices used by fake
news producers (Roozenbeek and van der Linden 2019; van der Linden et al. 2020). The educational game “fake news game”, in which players are encouraged to create a report using the same deceptive techniques as disinformation agents, proved to be efficient in increasing participants’ ability to debunk fake news (Roozenbeek and van der Linden 2019). In fact, it is known that people with higher literacy rates are better able to identify fake news (Jang and Kim 2018). Jones-Jang et al. (2021) also found that a greater ability of people to search for credible information online is related to a greater rebuttal of fake news. It is in this sense that literature considers it imperative to bet on media literacy to combat the proliferation of fake news. McDougall et al. (2019, p. 6) states that it is “necessary for education to offer an antidote to prevent the dangers of fake news”.

In addition to these predictors, the cognitive ability involved in information processing (along with motivated reasoning) has been one of the most studied aspects of how people interact with disinformation. With regard to cognitive styles, there is strong evidence that deliberate and analytical thinking can help not only in discerning disinformation (Baptista et al. 2021b; Pennycook and Rand 2019a; Stanley et al. 2020), but also positively related to the acceptance of false information corrections (Bago et al. 2020; Roets 2017) reducing the tendency of subjects to engage with false content on social media (Effron and Raj 2019).

3. Motivated Reasoning and Fake News Belief

There is an extensive literature that considers that individuals are more likely to accept information compatible with their beliefs and are more critical of information that diverges from their identity or the values they defend (Taber and Lodge 2006; Nickerson 1998; Lewandowsky et al. 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). There seems to be a bias in the judgment of information and in the interpretation of real events. Pre-existing beliefs always end up acting automatically and cause information to be processed by biases (Lodge and Taber 2005). In their own social relationships, human beings tend to make friends and relate to individuals who share the same ideas or points of view. This behavior on social media can lead to social alienation, forming echo chambers with homogeneous and compatible opinions (Baptista and Gradim 2021; Zimmer et al. 2019; Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2020). In fact, individuals tend to trust more information coming from friends or acquaintances (Messing and Westwood 2014; Sterrett et al. 2019).

Thus, confirmation bias (see Nickerson 1998) suggests that people also seek information in line with their ideological, political, or partisan motivations. This can lead to polarization of opinions (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Garrett et al. 2014) and, when motivated by political or social biases, this tendency can make it impossible to perceive well-founded beliefs (Mercier and Sperber 2017).

Therefore, the literature has sought to understand the consumption and dissemination of political disinformation considering motivated reasoning as a fundamental aspect. Several studies have resorted to the exposure of political fake news (in)compatible with the political and partisan identity of users (Pennycook et al. 2018; Baptista et al. 2021a, 2021c). In addition, motivated reasoning based on party-political identity also seems to help to understand selective exposure to fact-checking articles (Shin and Thorson 2017) and to understand how effective corrections are when they challenge users’ political convictions (Garrett et al. 2013; Robertson et al. 2020). Therefore, it is very important to understand whether there is a political and ideological (a)symmetrical reasoning in the discernment of fake news. Does motivated reasoning work the same or differently between right-wing people and left-wing people or between liberals and conservatives?

4. Methods

This systematic review followed a qualitative analysis that considered a set of criteria allowing us to extract data that corresponded to our objective. We used Scopus and Web of Science databases to examine the literature. The research focused between 2017 and 2021. We selected our data from the year 2017 because the literature considers that the phenomenon of contemporary fake news arose during the 2016 US elections. We did
not include the year 2016 in the data search in order to filter contemporary fake news. Literature published before and even in 2016 associates the phenomenon of fake news with political satire (Balmas 2014; Holbert 2005; Reilly 2012). Previously, fake news was part of entertainment television programs (Balmas 2014). Studies that focused on defining the new phenomenon began to emerge post-2016 (see Tandoc et al. 2018; Gelfert 2018; Rini 2017). We searched for publications that included the term “fake news” related to “political ideology”, “partisanship”, “left-wing”, “right-wing”, “liberal”, and “conservative” in the article titles, abstracts, and keywords. The focus of our research was on articles written in English, limited to a selection of those that had the United States or the European continent as their subject. We searched the literature in the Web of Science database and double-checked with Scopus database. Regarding the Web of Science database, we found that many articles have already been included in our Scopus selection. Our final sample consists of 40 articles (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Design and search strategy. Note: (a) In the Web of Science search, articles were presented by categories, for example “fake news AND ideology” or “fake news AND conservative”, so some articles appeared in duplicate in other categories because the keywords refer to very similar topics.

Regarding the criteria used, the following were excluded from our analysis: publications related to the identification and detection of fake news; review articles; articles focusing on the production and dissemination of fake news (artificial intelligence, bots,
trolls, automated processes); publications related to the concept and epistemology of fake news and studies that were not applied in Europe or the United States.

As for the inclusion criteria, we considered for our analysis all publications that seek to analyze predictors of belief and dissemination of fake news; articles focused on understanding fake news consumption and user behavior on social media; and comparative studies of political ideology and party orientation in relation to the consumption and dissemination of fake news.

Our choice of terms is essentially based on two political dimensions: liberal vs. conservative and left-wing vs. right-wing. By considering the two political-ideological dimensions, we increase the scope of our research also for Europe, since the left-right dichotomy is more commonly used for the political orientation of parties, politicians and citizens (Freire 2006; Baptista and Loureiro 2018). In this systematic review, we did not consider the Asian region because we aimed to understand the influence of political ideology on the belief in fake news, considering similar media and political systems, such as the reality of the United States and the European continent. Furthermore, left–right and liberalism–conservatism political dichotomies are based on similar values, social, moral, and political attitudes. These dichotomies have been, since the French Revolution, the main codes of communication to guide and interpret political action in Western societies (Freire 2006).

5. Bibliographic Analysis

Can susceptibility to fake news be dependent on political identity? This research question motivated researchers to seek to understand the effect of political ideology and partisanship on the consumption of fake news.

The analysis of the literature showed that there is no specific and validated methodology to assess the vulnerability of individuals to disinformation, namely to fake news. The most common method has been to classify fake and true headlines through online surveys, as shown in Tables 1 and 2 (e.g., Pennycook et al. 2018; Pennycook and Rand 2019a; Calvillo et al. 2020; Baptista et al. 2021a, 2021c). Political bias is mainly measured through the presentation of fake news headlines (in)compatible with political or partisan orientation. Other studies (such as Zimmermann and Kohring 2020; Hopp et al. 2020; Grinberg et al. 2019) collected data through user engagement on social media.

Table 1. Political asymmetry in the discernment of fake news (2017–2021).

| Study                  | Country | Method or Data               | Main Findings Related to Our Study                                                                 |
|------------------------|---------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pennycook and Rand (2019a) | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines | Trump supporters (Conservatives/Republicans) were less able to discern fake news (vs. Clinton supporters/Liberals/Democrats) |
| Pennycook and Rand (2019b) | US      | Classification of news sources (traditional media, hyperpartisan and fake news sites) according to familiarity and trust | Democrats were better at assessing media reliability, and their ratings were more strongly correlated with those of fact-checkers. |
| Calvillo et al. (2020)  | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines | Conservatism was identified as a predictor of belief in COVID-19 fake news, had a less accurate discernment for true and false COVID-19 headlines. |
| Hameleers (2020)        | US & NL | Content analysis: Twitter and Facebook messages | Right-wing populists in both countries label the media as fake news to de-legitimize their credibility. Left populists emphasize other divisions and do not blame the media. |
| Osmundsen et al. (2021) | US      | Survey and collection of (re)tweets on twitter | Republicans are more likely to share fake news compared to Democrats. |
| Study                        | Country | Method or Data                                                                 | Main Findings Related to Our Study                                                                 |
|------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| van Kessel et al. (2021)     | Europe  | Cross-national survey                                                          | High levels of online disinformation increase the likelihood of supporting a right-wing populist party. Being uninformed is more common among people who support right-wing populist parties |
| Calvillo et al. (2021a)      | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines                                    | Political conservatism were negatively related to the news discernment.                             |
| Baptista et al. (2021a)      | PT      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines                                    | Ideologically right-wing people (conservatives) exhibited a greater tendency to believe fake news, regardless of whether it is pro-left or pro-right fake news. |
| Weeks et al. (2021)          | US      | Exposure to disinformation sites based on web search history                    | Conservatives are more likely to expose themselves and engage with uninformative content.           |
| Calvillo et al. (2021b)      | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines                                    | Conservatism is associated with a greater belief in fake news that support voter fraud in the 2020 US elections. |
| Frischlich et al. (2021)     | DE      | Survey = Exposure to distorted news article and a typical journalist news media report | High (vs. low) authoritarians perceived distorted news with a right-wing editorial line to be more credible and also perceived a distorted news article with a left-leaning editorial stance as being more credible. |
| Baptista et al. (2021c)      | PT      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines                                    | Right-wing supporters (vs. left-wing supporters) are more likely to believe and share compatible fake news. |
| Whitsitt and Williams (2019) | US      | Classroom sessions: classification of politically accurate or inaccurate items  | Conservative students were less accurate in judging false political statements than liberal and independent students. |
| Lawson and Kakkar (2021)     | US      | Survey: Exposure to real and fake COVID-19 news stories                        | Sharing of fake news is largely driven by low conscientiousness conservatives. The authors found no differences in political ideology regarding high levels of consciousness. |
| Morris et al. (2020)         | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real news stories                                | Fake news inoculation effect: Conservatives (vs. liberals) are more likely to find the “truth” in fake news. |
| Guess et al. (2019)          | US      | Survey and Facebook profile data = Combining interviews with data about your actual behavior on social media | Conservatives are more likely to share fake news than liberals or moderates.                         |
| Grinberg et al. (2019)       | US      | Tweets Collection                                                              | Conservatives are more likely to engage with fake news sources.                                     |
| Zimmermann and Kohring (2020)| DE      | Collected survey data                                                          | Belief in fake news may have favored the right-wing populist party in the 2017 elections in Germany, radicalizing supporters of the moderate right. |
| Kudrnáč (2020)               | CZ      | Survey = Exposure to a political caricature or a graphic with a brief political declarative expression | The study demonstrates that motivated reasoning has a different effect for liberal and conservative students. |
| Leyva and Beckett (2020)     | US      | Survey = Exposure to Facebook news feed posts and online news article          | Fake news can reinforce the partisan dispositions of particularly politically conservative users.       |

Analyzing the main findings in the literature, we found that the task of “labeling” which political identity is more or less vulnerable to fake news can be difficult. It should be noted that most studies suggest that right-wing people (also conservatives or Republicans) tend to be less accurate in discerning fake news (Table 1).
Table 2. Political symmetry in the discernment of fake news (2017–2021).

| Study               | Country | Method or Data                                      | Main Findings Related to Our Study                                                                 |
|---------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jang and Kim (2018) | US      | Survey = Perceived influence of fake news on self and political groups | Third person effects of fake news: Both Republicans and Democrats believe that fake news is more influential outside the group. |
| van der Linden et al. (2020a) | US      | National Survey                                   | Both liberals and conservatives use the term fake news to label traditional media.                  |
| Faragó et al. (2019) | HU      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines       | Both people (who supported and did not support the government) believe more in fake news consistent with their beliefs. |
| Pennycook et al. (2018) | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines       | Trump supporters were more skeptical about mismatched fake news headlines than Clinton supporters (and vice versa). |
| Grady et al. (2021)  | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines with warning and without warning | Falsehood warning discourages belief in fake headlines. Two weeks later, the partisan bias persists for both Democrats and Republicans. |
| McPhetres et al. (2021) | US      | Survey = Exposure to politically biased “character-focused” | Political news of character depreciation seems equally appealing to Democrats and Republicans. |
| Szebeni et al. (2021) | HU      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines       | Participants (pro and anti-government) exhibited bias according to their political preferences.       |
| Pereira et al. (2018) | US      | Experimental Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines | Democrats and Republicans are more likely to believe and share compatible political news content.       |
| Hopp et al. (2020)   | US      | Data collected on social media                     | Sharing countermedia content is positively associated with the ideological extremity (liberal or conservative). |
| Horner et al. (2021) | US      | Survey = Exposure to fake and real headlines       | In general, both Democrats and Republicans considered fake headlines attacking the opposing political party more credible than those attacking their own. |

Although most studies focus on the North American scenario, this finding is evident in the United States and Europe. Even in relation to fake news related to the COVID-19 pandemic, conservatism was a strong predictor of belief (Calvillo et al. 2020). Other studies have also shown that conservatives are more likely to engage with false content (Weeks et al. 2021) and are more vulnerable to fake news alleging voter fraud in the 2020 US elections (Calvillo et al. 2021b). Furthermore, sharing fake news seems more common among strong supporters who hate their political opponents. This trend turned out to be stronger among Republicans (Osmundsen et al. 2021).

In Europe, belief in fake news is positively associated with right-wing people, especially radical right-wing people (Baptista et al. 2021a, 2021c; van Kessel et al. 2021) and right-wing authoritarianism (Frischlich et al. 2021). In Portugal, Baptista et al. (2021a) identified audiences ideologically (based on left and right dimension values) and found that ideologically right-wing people are clearly more susceptible to fake news than ideologically left-wing people. In fact, the findings of this study reject the theory of motivated reasoning, showing that ideologically right-wing people believe more in fake news, regardless of the political orientation they favor. In a similar study, but focused on partisanship rather than ideology, Baptista et al. (2021c) found that supporters of right-wing parties are more likely to share and believe compatible fake news. Supporters of left-wing parties did not show this tendency.

Focusing on young Czechs, Kudrnáč (2020) also noted that motivated reasoning occurs differently for liberals and conservatives. The study used anti-refugee (pro-conservative) and pro-refugee (pro-liberal) arguments in caricature format. Their results suggest that
trust in politics is an important aspect among conservatives to discern falsehoods. The most suspicious conservatives are the more affected by motivated reasoning (Kudrnáč 2020).

In the classroom context, also with the aim of evaluating the accuracy of young people in classifying fake and real content, Whitsitt and Williams (2019) identified an ideological asymmetry in students. Conservative students were less able to distinguish false political information than liberal or independent students.

Despite the majority revealing a political asymmetry in relation to vulnerability to fake news, some studies found data that reveal political symmetry. However, these results are not so obvious (see Table 2).

This trend supports the idea that motivated reasoning occurs in a similar way for liberals (left-wing people) and for conservatives (right-wing people). Some studies (e.g., Uscinski et al. 2016; Ditto et al. 2019) did not focus on fake news as an object of study, but found motivated reasoning on both sides.

Regarding studies that report political symmetry regarding the discernment of fake news (Table 2), we find fewer studies focused on Europe than previously (Table 1). European studies that have found political symmetry focus on Hungary and both use the pro-government and anti-government political dichotomy (Faragó et al. 2019; Szebeni et al. 2021). Both found that politically motivated reasoning affects both parties. Despite the dividing line being based on positions of power, Szebeni et al. (2021) also sought to understand the influence of right-wing authoritarianism on the belief in fake news, revealing that they did not find a consistent relationship, even if it exists.

As for the political symmetry observed in the American context, it was noticed that both sides (liberal and conservative) use the term “fake news” to label the traditional media (van der Linden et al. 2020a) and that both Republicans and Democrats believe that the “others”, outside their group, are more influenced by fake news (Jang and Kim 2018). However, despite the motivated political reasoning affecting both in relation to the use of the term “fake news”, the conservative audience is more likely to label the leftist or liberal media (e.g., CNN) as fake news, than liberals are to label the media associated with conservatives (e.g., Fox News) (van der Linden et al. 2020a). While the results suggest a partisan bias for both, conservatives are especially likely to use the term fake news in this way.

Contrary to studies that reveal a political difference in relation to the belief in fake news, some studies (mentioned in Table 2) do not show such consistent results. Using the evaluation of derogatory fake news, McPhetres et al. (2021) found that this type of headline can be attractive to both Democrats and Republicans. However, in a first experiment, the authors had observed that Republicans appeared to be more likely to share derogatory fake headlines. Moreover, Pereira et al. (2018) showed that Democrats and Republicans are prone to believe in compatible political fake news. However, the authors showed that Republicans are more likely to share and believe apolitical fake news. These data are relevant because they show that Republicans (conservative and right-wing) are overall more vulnerable than Democrats.

Furthermore, Hopp et al. (2020) also showed that counter-media sharing can be attractive to liberals and strong conservatives, but even so, conservatives (vs. liberals) represent a greater percentage of the shares found in social media. Finally, Horner et al. (2021) showed that both (liberals and conservatives) prefer to believe negative fake news about the outgroup. Still, the study noted that conservatives generally give higher ratings to headlines.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This systematic review sought to understand the relationship between political identity and the consumption of fake news as portrayed on current literature. Articles that directly or indirectly studied the effect of political-ideological orientation on the discernment of fake news were analyzed. According to the data collected, our findings reveal that most studies have identified a political asymmetry. Through various methods, studies were consistent
in revealing a greater vulnerability to fake news from conservatives and right-wing people. Even in studies that have observed that motivated political reasoning can affect both sides of politics, we find that conservatives or right-wing people are often more likely to believe and share fake news.

Overall, our review reveals that people seem more predisposed to accept information compatible with their pre-existing beliefs and to reject incompatible opinions or viewpoints. This can happen regardless of political identity. This tendency, inherent to the human being, can be observed on the left and on the right, but the right-wing political identity (or conservatism) seems to trigger motivated political reasoning more strongly and more frequently.

Furthermore, conservatives seem more susceptible to online disinformation and not just fake news. Several studies have confirmed greater vulnerability of conservatives (vs. liberals or left-wing people) to conspiracy theories (Douglas 2018; Douglas et al. 2019). Outside the North American scene, individuals with conservative and right-wing attitudes were identified as being more receptive to bullshits (Nilsson et al. 2019; Burger et al. 2020) or to believe in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 (Tonković et al. 2021).

The literature presents a series of characteristics associated with conservatives that might explain lower ability to discern fake news. First, the agents or producers of disinformation have conservatives as their specific audience (Baptista and Gradim 2020; Grinberg et al. 2019; Guess et al. 2019), producing content with an anti-system, conservative or populist rhetoric (Pierri et al. 2020; Pascale 2019; Zimmermann and Köring 2020; Scardigno and Mininni 2020). Populist political leaders themselves use disinformation as a strategic discursive element, appealing to alternative realities and reporting untruths and attacking traditional media (Hameleers and Minhold 2020). The narrative of antagonizing racial, sexual, or religious minorities is present in fake news and in the discourse of the populist radical right (Humprecht 2020). This narrative is easily perceived in the United States, in the rhetoric of former President Donald Trump. The combination of fake news with the conservative and populist audience can work out perfectly, considering that individuals with anti-political, anti-system, and populist attitudes have more hostile opinions towards the media and the European Union integration project (Schulz et al. 2020; Stier et al. 2020; Scardigno and Mininni 2020).

Conservatism is not only associated with greater distrust in the media (van der Linden et al. 2020a), but also with fact-checking (Robertson et al. 2020; Lyons et al. 2020) and with more resistance to correct false beliefs (Sinclair et al. 2020).

Second, the literature has pointed out a series of psychological aspects that can help to explain conservatives’ vulnerability to fake news. Conservatism is generally associated with prejudice, stigma, and intolerance (Jost et al. 2003) and is more sensitive to fear and major change (Fessler et al. 2017). In addition, conservative and right-wing people have also been associated with a more intuitive cognitive style in the way they process information (Deppe et al. 2015). This cognitive style is positively correlated with the belief and dissemination of fake news (Pennycook and Rand 2020; Sindermann et al. 2020).

To conclude, our systematic review allowed us to identify that in the current literature, an audience segment is more vulnerable to fake news. Most studies have shown that right-wing people or conservatives (vs. liberals) are less able to discern fake news. This trend was not found, at least with the same evidence, for liberals or left-wing people in any study. Throughout the discussion, we list some arguments that seem to justify this political asymmetry. It is important to note that this review reinforces the need to focus the fight against online disinformation targeting specific audiences. These findings suggest as a relevant challenge the promotion of media and digital literacy actions to increase trust in public institutions (e.g., journalism) among conservative audiences. Despite the abundant body of literature surveyed, further studies on audiences’ attitudes and behaviors are still needed.

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