“Everyone Lies” - How Propaganda Undermines Belief in the Truth

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The effectiveness of propaganda is often measured by how many people believe a particular message. Yet this approach overlooks another, equally important consequence of information manipulation. Propaganda can change not only a person’s understanding of an event but also their attitude towards information sources and facts. A manipulator may gain a political advantage even when a person does not accept the version of events being promoted but also distrusts the sources that refute it. The phrase “everyone lies” captures precisely this phenomenon: the assessment of evidence is replaced by a prior assumption that all sources are dishonest.

Another strategic function of propaganda is to devalue fact-based alternatives. Discrediting competing sources may go hand in hand with strengthening one’s own authority. Thus, “everyone lies” does not always signify universal distrust. It often expresses selective trust: unwelcome media outlets, civil society organisations and independent sources are grouped into a single suspect category, while those spreading this message place themselves outside it.

“Truth Decay”

To understand this problem, it is useful to consider the concept of “Truth Decay”, developed by Kavanagh and Rich (2018), which can be rendered approximately in Georgian as “the devaluation of truth”. The term refers to the diminishing importance of facts and reasoned analysis in public life. The authors ask to what extent verified, high-quality information serves as a shared foundation for public debate and political decisions. They identify four interrelated trends: increasing disagreement about facts and their analytical interpretations; the blurring of clear boundaries between fact and opinion;

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the growing volume and influence of opinion and personal experience relative to facts; and declining trust in sources regarded as authoritative providers of factual information.[3]

These trends reinforce one another. When sources are presumed untrustworthy from the outset, the information they provide can no longer help resolve disagreements. If evidence is presented as merely "one side's opinion", the question of its accuracy is displaced by considerations of political affiliation. Personal experience and intuition may become the main measures of credibility: citizens accept as correct whatever agrees with their existing views. The phrase "everyone lies" reinforces these prior beliefs by declaring information of every kind and quality equally unreliable.

Kavanagh and Rich identify cognitive biases, changes in the information ecosystem, challenges facing the education system and polarisation as drivers of Truth Decay. Accordingly, Truth Decay is not solely the result of the deliberate dissemination of falsehoods. It does, however, create favourable conditions for political manipulation: as the shared factual foundation weakens, political claims become harder to verify.[4] This framework describes public life in the United States, and comparisons with other countries require attention to the particular characteristics of each information environment. Nevertheless, similar trends are also observable globally.

Another RAND study (2019) compares changes in the presentation of news across American print, television and digital media. Using textual analysis, the authors examine differences in factual description, evaluative language and emotional presentation across periods and platforms. Some contemporary media formats exhibited more subjective and emotional language. In particular, opinion and efforts to engage audiences emotionally may occupy a larger place in the reporting of facts. This finding concerns the relationship between fact and evaluation; it does not, in itself, mean that emotionally presented information is false.[5] Nevertheless, it creates fertile ground for a broader decline in trust.

Lewandowsky, Ecker and Cook (2017) situate the problem of "post-truth" within a broader social environment. Correcting an individual error will have limited results if polarisation, fragmented media consumption and institutional distrust undermine the authority of verification itself. In their view,

[3] Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life (RAND Corporation, 2018), RR-2314-RC. Via link: https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2314

[4] Ibid. Via link: https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2314

[5] Jennifer Kavanagh, William Marcellino, Jonathan S. Blake, Shawn Smith, Steven Davenport, and Mahlet Gizaw, News in a Digital Age: Comparing the Presentation of News Information over Time and Across Media Platforms (RAND Corporation, 2019). Via link: https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2960

responding to propaganda therefore requires both checking specific claims and understanding the conditions under which society recognises a substantiated answer as trustworthy.[6]

Uncertainty as a political resource

Ecker's (2026) review focuses on how the consequences of disinformation affect the acquisition and acceptance of reliable knowledge. The authors review research that examines disinformation as a strategy for damaging a shared factual foundation. Its effects may include weakening common standards of truth and increasing uncertainty. Citizens are then not simply given an incorrect answer; they are led to doubt whether obtaining a reliable answer is possible at all.[7]

This phenomenon has particular political significance. A specific piece of false information can be refuted with appropriate evidence. But if citizens regard every piece of evidence as fabricated and every source as an interested party, they approach additional information with the same suspicion. Verification requires ever greater effort, while reaching a substantiated conclusion comes to seem impossible. The search for answers to contentious public issues is gradually replaced by the question: who really knows what actually happened?

In their "firehose of falsehood" model of Russian propaganda, Paul and Matthews (2016) describe high-volume, multichannel, rapid and repetitive communication that is unconcerned with factual accuracy or consistency. In this context, the circulation of mutually incompatible accounts of the same event is commonplace, and the sheer number of versions may make it difficult to identify a credible explanation. Therefore, detailed rebuttals of individual disinformation messages do not always produce a shared understanding of an event.[8]

A prominent example of this approach is Russian disinformation about the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17. On 17 July 2014, the aircraft was shot down over eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. The international investigation team established that the Buk missile launcher used belonged to the Russian army. At the same time, Russian official sources and pro-Kremlin media

[6] Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, and John Cook, "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the 'Post-Truth' Era," Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition 6, no. 4 (2017): 353–369. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008

[7] Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Emily R. Spearing, Renee DiResta, and Stephan Lewandowsky, "Misinformation as strategy: Epistemic consequences and the undermining of shared truth," Trends in Cognitive Sciences (2026). Via link: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2026.06.009

[8] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It (RAND Corporation, 2016). Via link: https://doi.org/10.7249/PE198

circulated various accounts: “the aircraft was shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet”; “it was shot down by a Ukrainian Buk”; or “a bomb exploded on board”. Alongside shifting responsibility, these accounts served to discredit the investigation and its evidence. The significance of this case lies precisely in the proliferation of alternative explanations: mutually incompatible allegations may leave audiences feeling that it is impossible to establish what happened with any certainty.[9]

A model developed by Alexei Zakharov (2026) describes another aspect of this process. The author offers a theoretical analysis of audiences that interpret media messages in terms of political interests. If citizens attribute similar motives to different sources, even inaccurate information discovered in one source may become, for them, evidence of competing sources’ dishonesty. Exposing one source therefore does not necessarily strengthen the authority of an alternative.[10]

Imitations of fact-checking can also be used to increase uncertainty. An online experiment by Alyukov and Zavadskaya (2026) examines the effects of pseudo-fact-checking among 2 949 respondents in wartime Russia. The authors investigate how reactions differ to materials with different political orientations presented in a fact-checking format. Some of these materials reduced the credibility of impartial fact-checkers and increased uncertainty.[11]

The connection between discrediting evidence and imitating verification also emerged in Russian communications about the killings of civilians in Bucha. In early April 2022, after Russian forces withdrew, Russian officials declared the photographs and videos that emerged to be a “staged provocation” by Ukrainians. The platform WarOnFakes also helped circulate this account, with Russian diplomatic accounts sharing and distributing its content. An analysis by the Centre for Information Resilience compared videos recorded on the ground with imagery from two independent satellite sources: bodies on Yablunska Street were visible while the city was still under Russian control. Later, the UN monitoring mission confirmed the killings of 73 civilians in Bucha and continued investigating additional cases.[12] In this example, the denial targeted the credibility of the evidence itself and of the

[9] EUvsDiSiNFO. (2024). MH17: ten years of Russian lying and denying. Via link: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/mh17-ten-years-of-russian-lying-and-denying/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[10] Alexei Zakharov, “Propaganda to a cynical audience,” Political Science Research and Methods (2026). 1–12. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2025.10081

[11] Maxim Alyukov and Margarita Zavadskaya, “‘It’s Not That Simple, We Don’t Know the Whole Truth’: The Effects of Pseudo Fact Checking in Wartime Russia,” Perspectives on Politics (2026). Via link: https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272610454X

[12] Benjamin Strick. (2022). Disinformation & Denial: Russia’s attempts to discredit open-source evidence of Bucha. Via link: https://www.info-res.org/app/uploads/2024/11/Bucha-Disinformation-Report_April-22.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

sources that obtained it: the format of so-called “verification” was used to cast doubt on facts that had already been documented.

The infrastructure established by the Kremlin also illustrates the political appropriation of independent fact-checkers’ authority. Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2025) describes how the Global Fact-Checking Network, founded by Kremlin-linked organisations, is presented as an independent fact-checker and a kind of “competitor” to the International Fact-Checking Network, a network of independent fact-checkers. In reality, it selectively disseminates information favourable to the Russian authorities while ignoring or distorting unwelcome facts. In RSF’s assessment, this is an attempt to appropriate the form and authority of independent journalism: political messages are delivered to audiences as “verified truth”. RSF identifies similar initiatives in other countries, demonstrating how disinformation can be spread in the name of combating disinformation.[13]

Similar signs of the use of fact-checking formats for political communication can also be found in Georgia’s information space. An MDF report (2025) highlights the Facebook page “სინამდვილეში” (“In Reality”, [Sinamsdvileshi]), created by Georgian Dream’s Communications Department. According to the report, the page imitates a fact-checking format but discredits non-governmental organisations, critical media and political opponents without providing methodological justification. The report describes the use of discrediting labels and their coordinated dissemination with the participation of public servants.[14]

The significance of this case lies in the political appropriation of the authority associated with verification. Critical media are declared unreliable, while party communication assumes the role of arbiter of credibility. Citizens may consequently be offered a predetermined answer about whom to trust, without any transparent method being provided to substantiate that answer.

A 2025 study conducted by CRRC-Georgia for MDF also describes manifestations of the “everyone lies” attitude. It includes a telephone survey of 1,053 Georgian-speaking respondents and five focus groups.

United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU). UN Report Details Summary Executions of Civilians by Russian Troops in Northern Ukraine from February to April. 7 December 2022. Via link: https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/UN-report-details-summary-executions-of-civilians-by-Russian-troops-in-northern-Ukraine-from-February-to-April?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[13] Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2025). Russia: fact-checking is the Kremlin's latest propaganda tool. Via link: https://rsf.org/en/russia-fact-checking-kremlins-latest-propaganda-tool

[14] Tamar Kintsurashvili, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and Informational Autocracy in Georgia (Media Development Foundation). Via link: https://mdfgeorgia.ge/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/17.12Report-ENG.pdf

In the qualitative section of the report, some participants regard verifying information as pointless because they perceive all media as biased; instead, they rely on their own experience and intuition.[15]

Scepticism, cynicism and selective trust

Scepticism towards information involves searching for additional evidence, whereas cynicism often rejects in advance the very possibility of obtaining accurate information. Sceptical citizens compare independent sources, examine how information was obtained and assess media outlets' willingness to correct errors. The phrase "everyone lies" stands in direct opposition to this approach: a single error by a source becomes a sign of its permanent dishonesty, and other sources are placed in the same category. The issue is therefore not simply a lack of trust; it also concerns whether people are willing to revise their assessments.

Otto, Mangold and Maier (2026) investigated this phenomenon. During Germany's 2021 parliamentary election, they conducted a three-wave survey with an initial sample of 739 participants and linked the results to data on participants' online behaviour. Specifically, they used a browser extension to track which news websites participants visited. The study therefore did not rely solely on people's accounts of their behaviour but also assessed their actual online news consumption. The results reveal an interesting pattern: scepticism was associated with more intensive news consumption, visits to more sources and a more even distribution of attention among them. Cynicism, by contrast, was associated with lower engagement and a comparatively narrower range of sources. Although the study cannot establish a direct causal effect, its central finding is that one form of distrust coexists with information-seeking, while another is associated with disengagement from the information environment.[16]

A study by Jones-Jang, Kim and Kenski (2026) examines this issue from a different perspective. Using two-wave panel data collected around the 2020 US presidential election, the authors track the same respondents' perceptions over time. They distinguish between perceived exposure to misinformation, perceived exposure to claims debunked by fact-checking, assessments of the prevalence of misinformation and perceived exposure to hostile information. The study's main finding is that the

[15] CRRC-Georgia, Survey on Media Consumption and Disinformation in Georgia 2025 (ordered by Media Development Foundatin). Via link: https://mdfgeorgia.ge/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/CRRC-MDF_Report_ENG_28.07.2025.pdf

[16] Lukas P. Otto, Frank Mangold, and Michaela Maier, "Two Forms of Media Distrust: Cynicism, Skepticism, and Online News Exposure," Communication Research (2026). Method and Associations with Online News Exposure. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502261458955

development of cynicism is more strongly associated with the sense that misinformation is widespread and the information environment is hostile than with mere exposure to false claims. Discovering a specific falsehood and believing that the entire information space is saturated with lies are therefore different processes. This conclusion is particularly important when assessing propaganda: manipulation may target not only individual facts but also perceptions of the information environment itself.[17]

The possible political consequences of cynicism are also evident in Ahmed's (2025) study. In an online survey of 970 respondents in India, the authors assessed political cynicism, belief in false political claims and the frequency of participation in online political activities. The results showed that political cynicism was associated with lower levels of online participation.[18]

Alongside devaluing competing sources, propaganda also serves to strengthen trust among its own audience. Shirikov's (2024) article brings together three studies conducted in Russia in 2019-2020: a large-scale online experiment, an experiment embedded in a national survey of 1 608 adult respondents, and an online survey of 2 200 participants about perceptions of the media. In the experiments, news items were randomly attributed to different sources. This allowed the author to test how assessments of credibility changed when information was labelled as coming from state or independent media. Government supporters rated information attributed to a state source as more credible, particularly when it agreed with their political views. Moreover, acknowledging state media's political dependence did not necessarily preclude trust in them. For example, 58% of government supporters acknowledged that Channel One was not independent of the government; nevertheless, 49% of this group still considered the channel's reporting mostly accurate. Awareness of a media outlet's pro-government bias can therefore coexist with trust in that source.[19]

This finding helps explain the selective nature of the "everyone lies" approach. Citizens may reject other sources because of their political interests while finding similar affiliations acceptable in media they favour. In such cases, credibility depends on how closely a source agrees with existing beliefs.

[17] S. Mo Jones-Jang, Dam Hee Kim, and Kate Kenski, "Misinformation exposure per se may not trigger cynicism, but perceived prevalence of misinformation and hostile information does," Information, Communication & Society (2026). Via link: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2026.2622332

[18] Saifuddin Ahmed, Muhammad Masood, Ruolan Deng, and Shruti Malviya, "Why cynics disengage: the nexus of political cynicism, misinformation, and online political participation," Asian Journal of Communication 35, no. 5 (2025): 381–402. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2025.2538142

[19] Anton Shirikov, "Rethinking Propaganda: How State Media Build Trust through Belief Affirmation," The Journal of Politics 86, no. 4 (2024): 1319–1332. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1086/729941

Discrediting competing sources and strengthening trust in one's own source may therefore be complementary elements of the same strategy.

Egelhofer and Lecheler's (2019) article clarifies this issue at the conceptual level. Based on a literature review, the authors distinguish between "fake news" as a deliberately created pseudo-journalistic product and "fake news" as a political label. In the first case, they identify three characteristics: low factual accuracy, a journalistic format and an intention to deceive. An ordinary journalistic error therefore cannot automatically be equated with deliberately produced disinformation.

The second case concerns the use of the term to undermine the authority of journalism and the media. Discussion of a particular report's accuracy may be replaced by an allegation that the source disseminates "fake news" in general. The authors' framework is important precisely because it makes this distinction visible: checking a false claim and politically discrediting its source are different actions. Conflating them blurs the boundary between good-faith criticism and generalised distrust.[20]

Similar practices aimed at weakening the authority of critical sources can also be found in Georgia's information space. In such communication, emphasising a source's political interests may shift attention away from its arguments and evidence towards its motives.[21]

Synthetic media[22] and the denial of authentic evidence

AI-generated audiovisual material adds another dimension to the problem of trust. In an online experiment involving 2 005 British adults, Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) used three versions of a fabricated video of Barack Obama. Two short versions did not explain that the video had been manipulated, while the full version revealed to viewers that it had been artificially created. Participants were randomly assigned to watch one version, after which the authors compared measures of misperception, uncertainty and trust in news on social media. The video's content misled 16% of participants, while 33.2% remained uncertain. The short, misleading versions did not show a

[20] Jana Laura Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler, "Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda," Annals of the International Communication Association 43, no. 2 (2019): 97–116. Via link: https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2019.1602782

[21] Kutidze, D. (2021). *The Georgian Government's Aggressive, Propagandistic Rhetoric towards the Media: A Tried-and-Tested Authoritarian Method for Discrediting Journalists*. Gnomon Wise Research Institute. Available at: https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/57

[22] Any digital content - text, images, audio or video - generated or modified using artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning algorithms, rather than created by humans using traditional methods. https://cnti.org/issue-primers/synthetic-media-deepfakes/

higher likelihood of outright deception, but they did increase uncertainty. This uncertainty, in turn, was associated with lower trust in news on social media. The potential impact of a video therefore cannot be measured solely by whether people believe a falsehood: individuals may disbelieve what they have seen and still become more suspicious of other reports.[23]

Chesney and Citron's (2019) concept of the "liar's dividend" describes another aspect of the same problem. According to the authors, awareness of the spread of synthetic media can also be used to challenge genuine evidence: a person whose actions appear in an authentic recording can claim that the material was artificially generated. This possibility benefits those who wish to deny real facts.[24] Such a claim will not automatically persuade an audience, but it places an additional burden on those presenting the recording to prove its authenticity. Technology therefore does more than enable the creation of false material; its very existence can become an argument against the credibility of genuine material. Here, too, propaganda may benefit simply from keeping doubt alive.

This possibility once again highlights the distinction between establishing a fact and securing its public acceptance. The existence of evidence is no longer sufficient if every confirmation of its authenticity is assessed through the same lens of generalised distrust.

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The concept of Truth Decay shows how information manipulation can damage the role of facts in shared public debate. The studies discussed describe various mechanisms associated with this process, manifestations of which can also be found in Georgia's information space. The phrase "everyone lies" is particularly harmful when, rather than supporting reasoned criticism of sources, it serves to equate poor-quality and high-quality journalism. In such an environment, propaganda may no longer need to establish its own version of events fully, because maintaining doubt about competing accounts may be enough to secure a political advantage.

[23] Cristian Vaccari and Andrew Chadwick, "Deepfakes and Disinformation: Exploring the Impact of Synthetic Political Video on Deception, Uncertainty, and Trust in News." Social Media + Society 6, no. 1 (2020). Via link: https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120903408

[24] Bobby Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security," California Law Review 107, no. 6 (2019): 1753–1820, 'The Liar's Dividend: Beware the Cry of Deep-Fake News'. Via link: https://www.californialawreview.org/print/deep-fakes-a-looming-challenge-for-privacy-democracy-and-national-security

Several interconnected factors contribute to the development of this attitude. An abundance of contradictory reports makes verification more difficult and increases uncertainty, while political polarisation often ties a source's credibility to its group affiliation. At the same time, genuine media errors, opaque practices and the conflation of fact and evaluation give propaganda a basis for deepening distrust. These conditions are compounded by deliberate discrediting, imitations of fact-checking and the denial of genuine evidence on the grounds that, with the help of artificial intelligence, "anything can now be faked".

Therefore, responses to propaganda cannot rely solely on refuting false claims when manipulation targets the credibility of the verifying sources themselves. Readers must have access to the basis for a conclusion: the original source, the steps taken to verify it, corroboration by independent sources and clear indications of which facts remain unestablished.

At the individual level, one possible response is to develop reasoned scepticism: comparing different sources, distinguishing facts from evaluations in news reporting and remaining willing to revise one's views. Those working to strengthen media literacy should clearly explain how manipulation works and how a good-faith error differs from deliberate fabrication. In addition, rapidly spreading falsehoods require timely, accessible explanations that offer readers an evidence-based account in place of the false version. These approaches cannot automatically restore trust in quality media, but they can create a path from generalised distrust towards reasoned assessment.