

---

Final report

**Misinformation, alternative media and conspiracy theories – How the Swiss population deals with disinformation**

---

March 2021

Authors: Daniel Vogler, Lisa Schwaiger, Jörg Schneider, Linards Udris, Dario Siegen, Sarah Marschlich, Adrian Rauchfleisch, Mark Eisenegger

Forschungszentrum Öffentlichkeit  
und Gesellschaft (fög)  
University of Zurich

**fög**

*Forschungszentrum  
Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft*

Please cite this report as follows:

Vogler, D., Schwaiger, L., Schneider, J., Udris, L., Siegen, D., Marschlich, S., Rauchfleisch, A., Eisenegger, M. (2021). Misinformation, alternative media and conspiracy theories – How the Swiss population deals with disinformation. Report for the Federal Office of Communications.

## Executive Summary

A democratic society depends on citizens having access to reliable and factual information, particularly – but not only – in times of crisis such as that of the Coronavirus pandemic. Disinformation – in other words the deliberate spread of fake news – is therefore a problem for democracy. Until now, it was assumed that disinformation was not very widespread in Switzerland. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has put the issue more firmly on the public agenda. This report examines how the Swiss deal with disinformation and the role misinformation, alternative media and conspiracy theories play in the public and in the perception of the people. It presents the results of a representative population survey on the problem of disinformation in Switzerland, provides an inventory of websites and alternative social media, and shows the significance of alternative media with a computer-assisted analysis of the activities of all active users on the Swiss Twitter platform.

The following key findings are the result of this research:

- Swiss people perceive disinformation to be a serious problem. They consider the problem to be most serious with regard to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has therefore acted as a catalyst with regard to public perception of the problem of disinformation in Switzerland. It has put the issue more firmly on the public agenda and increased public concern.
- Media consumption habits influence how often people encounter disinformation, how serious they consider the problem to be, and how they deal with it. Disinformation is primarily a phenomenon of the virtual world. People reported that they encounter disinformation particularly on social media, in messenger apps and in alternative media. Consuming professional news media, however, potentially acts to correct this and reduces susceptibility to conspiracy theories.
- Despite concerns among the population, few Swiss use alternative media or are susceptible to conspiracy theories. The perception of the problem therefore contrasts with the actual use of and affinity for disinformation content. The vast majority of alternative media use in Switzerland comes from abroad. Although little exists, alternative media from Switzerland often has an audience that extends to neighbouring countries. Disinformation in Switzerland is therefore a transnational phenomenon.
- Disinformation is not equally prevalent on all digital platforms. Analysing reach and link activities shows that alternative media can be more readily spread in Switzerland

on *YouTube* and *Facebook*. The survey data also shows that disinformation is spread and consumed on messenger services such as *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*, some of which are not public.

- The current heightened public awareness of disinformation in Switzerland can be seen as an opportunity. It allows for the population to be sensitised to the problem and learn how to deal with problematic content. It would be beneficial to cultivate misinformation literacy, i.e. learn to recognise and deal with misinformation.