
Editors' Note

This special issue brings together eight contributions that examine disinformation, conspiratorial thinking, digital mediation, and political communication in Croatia and the wider Adriatic-Balkan space. Except for the final review article, the issue is anchored in the broader research agenda of the Adria Digital Media Observatory (ADMO). This common background gives the collection both thematic coherence and methodological diversity. Taken together, the articles show that contemporary disinformation cannot be reduced to isolated falsehoods or episodic “fake news”. Rather, it is treated here as a wider (dis)information order shaped by platform architectures, conspiratorial predispositions, political memory, symbolic othering, click-driven journalism, generative artificial intelligence, and official state communication. The issue therefore moves across various levels of analysis: from individual beliefs and psychological predispositions, through news production and media framing, to electoral manipulation, diplomatic messaging, and the governance dilemmas posed by generative AI.

The intellectual rationale of the issue rests on a simple but important premise: disinformation research is at its strongest when it refuses narrow boundaries. Several of the articles collected here indeed examine false, misleading, or manipulative content directly. But others ask a prior question: what social, psychological, and communicative conditions make such content persuasive, resonant, or durable? For that reason, the issue does not treat disinformation as a self-contained anomaly. It situates it within broader struggles over trust, visibility, identity, legitimacy, and political interpretation. In this respect, the contributions you can find here are complementary. Some focus on the temporal stability and psychosocial consequences of conspiratorial thinking; others analyze how media construct symbolic outsiders, spectacularize controversial events, or mediate unresolved historical disputes. Still others investigate how emerging technological infrastructures – from generative AI

to official diplomatic Facebook pages – reshape the contemporary information environment.

The opening article, “Is Belief in Conspiracy Theories Stable or Moody? Evidence from Panel Data in Croatia” by Nebojša Blanuša and Bartul Vuksan-Ćusa, addresses one of the most important unresolved questions in the study of conspiracism: is conspiratorial thinking a relatively stable predisposition, or a fluctuating response to changing events and information environments? Using a four-wave panel survey conducted in Croatia between 2022 and 2025, the authors show that conspiratorial thinking displays strong rank-order persistence and only modest aggregate change, placing it closer to trait-like political attitudes than to highly volatile opinions. At the same time, the article does not reduce conspiracism to rigidity: meaningful within-person change remains visible, and the exploratory analysis suggests that baseline TikTok use helps distinguish more stable from less stable participants. The article thus provides a strong conceptual and empirical point of departure for the entire issue, since it anchors later discussions of disinformation in a broader account of how conspiratorial orientations endure over time while remaining open to contextual modulation.

The second contribution, “Othering and Representation of Foreign Workers in Croatian Online Media in 2024 and 2025” by Marijana Grbeša, Milica Vučković and Stela Lechpammer, turns from beliefs to media representation and asks how Croatian online journalism frames one of the country’s most rapidly politicized contemporary social questions: the growing presence of foreign workers. Based on a quantitative content analysis of 269 headlines and 210 articles across ideologically diverse outlets, the article shows that foreign workers are predominantly represented through conflict, victimhood, and social tension, while their own voices remain comparatively marginal. Particularly important is the finding that references to migrant-related disinformation are rare, despite the broader salience of such narratives in European digital spaces. The article broadens the issue’s agenda beyond narrowly defined disinformation by showing how symbolic exclusion can be reproduced through ordinary journalistic routines, lexical choices, and editorial emphases. The result is a valuable reminder that manipulative information environments are sustained not only by overt falsehoods, but also by patterned representational asymmetries.

The third article, “Karadžorđevo and the Division of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Media Narratives and Contested Memories of Yugoslavia’s Dissolution” by Davor Pauković, Monika Cverlin and Sandra Buratović Maštrapa, addresses a very different object, but one equally central to the politics of interpretation: the media life of contested historical/conspiratorial memory. Focusing on the enduring claim that Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević agreed on the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina at Karadžorđevo in 1991, the authors examine how this narrative appears

across Croatian online media between 2002 and 2025. Conceptually, the article situates the claim within the study of contested memories and competing historiographical narratives surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Empirically, it traces frequency and stance across 22 outlets. In the context of this issue, the article is important because it shows that disinformation-adjacent phenomena do not concern only the present tense of platforms and virality; they also concern the afterlives of unresolved mnemonic disputes, especially when their claims structure group identity, political legitimacy, and antagonistic memory in post-conflict societies.

The fourth contribution, “Constructing the Spectacle: Clickbait Strategies in the Media Coverage of Thompson’s Concert in Zagreb” by Silvija Vuković and Sunčica Šoljan, shifts attention to the relationship between platformized journalism and the production of media spectacles. Using the case of Marko Perković Thompson’s 2025 concert, the article argues that clickbait practices are not just incidental headline devices but part of a broader mechanism through which contemporary spectacles are formatted and sustained in the digital attention economy. The empirical findings are striking: on the day of the event, 71.43% of all content published on the Facebook pages of three leading Croatian news portals focused on Thompson or the concert, while 89.6% of the relevant headlines contained at least one clickbait variable. This article usefully expands the scope of the issue by demonstrating that the contemporary information disorder is inseparable from media business models, algorithmic visibility, and the stylization of controversy. In that sense, spectacularization, too, becomes part of the ecology within which misleading, exaggerated, and manipulative content circulates.

The fifth article, “The Dark Side of Belief: Personality, Conspiratorial Thinking and Mental Health” by Mirjana Tonković, Ivana Hromatko and Andrea Vranić, returns to conspiratorial thinking but places it within a different explanatory frame. Whereas the first contribution examines temporal stability, this article investigates whether belief in conspiracy theories explains individual differences in mental health above and beyond demographics and Dark Tetrad personality traits. Drawing on a national quota sample of 690 respondents, the authors show that lower income, higher psychopathy, higher sadism, and stronger conspiratorial thinking are associated with poorer mental health, and that conspiratorial belief contributes unique explanatory power even after controlling for demographic and personality variables. This makes the article an important complement to the first one: together, the two contributions show that conspiratorial thinking is at once comparatively stable over time and psychologically consequential, not merely politically expressive. The implication is that conspiracism should be understood not only as a political or epistemic orientation, but also as a phenomenon with broader consequences for social and psychological well-being.

The sixth contribution, “Generative AI and the Transformation of Algorithmic Populism: From Amplification to Content Creation” by Mato Brautović, Marko Roško, Ivana Grkeš Tošović and Romana John, addresses one of the most urgent developments in today’s communication environment: the growing role of generative AI in political disinformation. Focusing on the Croatian parliamentary and presidential elections of 2024/2025, the article identifies 115 cases of AI-generated disinformation and argues that generative AI is reshaping algorithmic populism by extending it from amplification to content production and adaptation. The study shows that most cases circulated on Facebook and TikTok, that voice synthesis and face swapping were especially prominent techniques, and that leading political figures such as Zoran Milanović, Andrej Plenković, and Dragan Primorac were the principal targets. Particularly valuable is the article’s insistence that generative AI should not be understood merely as a new technical instrument. It is also a structural transformation of the communicative environment, one that lowers the threshold for producing persuasive synthetic political content and further destabilizes trust in audiovisual evidence.

The seventh article, “Digital Diplomacy and FIMI-related Communication: Russian Embassy Facebook Activity in the Adriatic-Balkan Region” by Marko Roško, Marijana Musladin and Ivana Grkeš Tošović, widens the analytical lens from domestic political communication to official state messaging in a contested geopolitical environment. Based on a manual quantitative content analysis of 6,996 Facebook posts published by Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro between 2019 and 2023, the article distinguishes routine diplomatic communication from FIMI-related communication and maps the temporal and thematic distribution of the latter. The analysis shows that broader Russian narratives concerning Ukraine, NATO, the EU, and the United States were localized through country-specific political disputes, especially Kosovo, Republika Srpska, the Dayton Agreement, and Montenegro’s relations with Russia. In doing so, the article contributes an important dimension to the issue: the contemporary information environment is not shaped only by anonymous online actors or platform-native disinformation entrepreneurs, but also by overt, official, and diplomatically framed state communication.

The final contribution, “Chatbots in the Role of Text Generation on Social Media and Their Impact on Political Developments” by Marija Pokos Lukinec, Dijana Oreški and Dino Vlahek, differs from the preceding seven articles in both form and function. Rather than presenting original empirical findings from the ADMO research agenda, it offers a broader literature-based overview of generative AI, chatbots, transparency, regulation, and political manipulation. The article surveys the opportunities and risks associated with tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude,

and Perplexity, paying special attention to bias, hallucinations, the opacity of large language models, and the implications of EU regulatory responses such as the Code of Practice on Disinformation, the Digital Services Act, and the AI Act. As the concluding text in the issue, it performs a useful synthetic role. It situates several concerns that recur across the preceding contributions – manipulation, synthetic content, platform governance, corporate power, and democratic vulnerability – within a wider debate on the political implications of generative AI.

Read together, these eight contributions reveal several broader patterns. Firstly, they show that the contemporary (dis)information order is hybrid in the fullest sense: it includes beliefs and predispositions, professional journalism, digital platforms, synthetic media, and official geopolitical communication. Secondly, they demonstrate that Croatia and the wider Adriatic-Balkan region offer a particularly valuable laboratory for such research. Here, rapid technological change intersects with unresolved historical memory, post-socialist institutional transformation, polarized media systems, contested geopolitical orientations, and evolving forms of social vulnerability. Thirdly, the issue shows that disinformation research benefits from methodological pluralism. Panel surveys, quantitative content analysis, electoral case mapping, diplomatic communication analysis, and literature review each illuminate different parts of a common problem.

Consequently, this special issue should be read not only as a collection of separate case studies, but also as a cumulative intervention. It argues, implicitly but consistently, that disinformation today is not a marginal phenomenon located at the outskirts of democratic communication. It is woven into the infrastructures, routines, narratives, and anxieties of contemporary public life. Some of its forms are spectacular and technologically novel; others are slower, more sedimented, and embedded in memory, identity, and everyday media practice. By bringing these dimensions together, the issue aims to contribute both to the regional study of Croatia and the Adriatic-Balkan area and to wider comparative debates on conspiracism, platformization, FIMI, political communication, and generative AI. That, ultimately, is the broader significance of the ADMO research constellation presented here: it helps us see how the new information disorder is assembled across different sites, actors, and temporalities – and why understanding it requires sustained dialogue between media studies, political science, psychology, and area studies.

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Zagreb, 14 July 2026