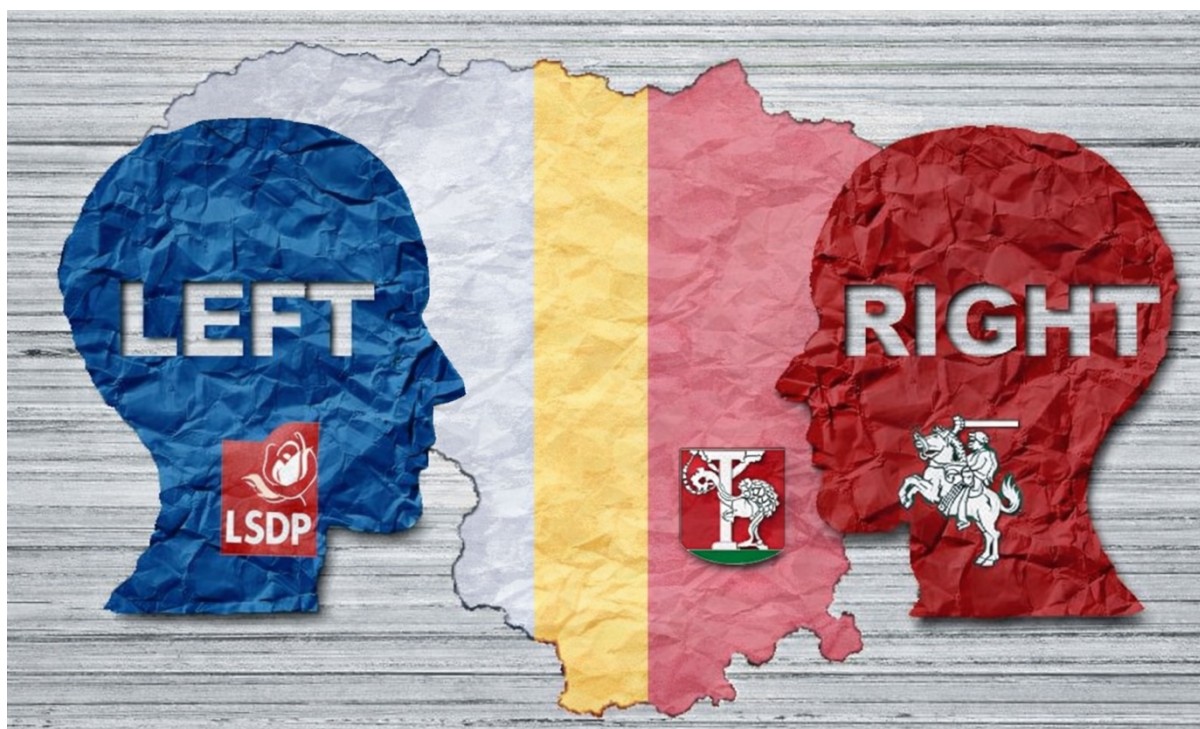


Online Misinformation and the Erosion of Trust in Social Institutions

Lessons from Lithuania



Introduction

Over the past two decades, democratic societies have experienced a marked erosion of trust in core social institutions, including government, political parties, mainstream media, science, and public expertise. While declining trust predates the digital era, the contemporary online information environment has intensified and reshaped this process. Online misinformation does not merely distort factual understanding; it undermines the perceived legitimacy of institutions that traditionally functioned as epistemic authorities. As a result, trust is increasingly relocated from formal institutions to informal networks, peer communities, and digitally mediated influencers.

This transformation has profound implications for democratic governance, social cohesion, and adult education. Rather than operating as a simple deficit of information or critical thinking, misinformation exploits deeper structural vulnerabilities related to trust, identity, and meaning-making. Lithuania offers a particularly instructive case, as it combines post-Soviet historical legacies, high geopolitical threat salience, and an intensely digitized public sphere. Examining the Lithuanian context allows for a deeper understanding of how



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misinformation becomes embedded in social relations and collective narratives rather than remaining a marginal or purely cognitive phenomenon.

Trust, Social Capital, and Epistemic Authority

Social Capital and the Differentiation of Trust

Classical theories of social capital conceptualize trust as a relational resource embedded in social networks and shared norms (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Within this tradition, scholars distinguish between **institutional (vertical) trust**: trust in state institutions, legal systems, science, and media, and **interpersonal (horizontal) trust**, which operates within families, peer groups, and local communities.

Late-modern societies increasingly exhibit a decoupling of these two forms of trust. While institutional trust declines, interpersonal and network-based trust often remains stable or even intensifies. This shift does not represent a generalized collapse of trust, but rather its **relocalization** from formal systems to informal and affective social structures.

Structural Drivers of Institutional Distrust

Research identifies several structural factors contributing to declining institutional trust. Historical legacies shape expectations toward authority, particularly in post-authoritarian contexts where institutions are perceived as imposed, opaque, or elite-driven (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Performance-based distrust further emerges from perceived corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, unequal access to services, and weak accountability mechanisms (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

The digital transformation of the information environment amplifies these dynamics. The erosion of journalistic gatekeeping, algorithmic prioritization of emotionally charged content, and the proliferation of competing epistemic authorities contribute to what has been described as **epistemic fragmentation** (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In such contexts, credibility is increasingly grounded in perceived authenticity and identity alignment rather than procedural expertise.

Peer-Based Trust, Influencers, and Networked Authority

As institutional trust weakens, epistemic authority migrates toward peer-based actors. Influencers and online opinion leaders function as cultural intermediaries who translate complex issues into morally resonant narratives (Bourdieu, 1984). Trust in these actors is relational rather than procedural: it is granted because they are perceived as “one of us,” articulate shared grievances, and provide emotional coherence in uncertain environments.



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Online communities increasingly resemble neo-tribal formations characterized by strong in-group trust and weak out-group trust (Maffesoli, 1996). These formations generate **bonding social capital**, reinforcing internal solidarity, while simultaneously eroding **bridging social capital**, which is essential for cross-group cooperation and democratic deliberation (Putnam, 2000).

Misinformation as a Social and Moral Mechanism

Collective Narratives and Moral Framing

Misinformation is most effective when embedded within collective narratives that organize social reality through moral frames rather than empirical accuracy. Collective narratives provide interpretive schemas that define who belongs, who threatens the group, and which sources of authority are legitimate. Moral framing theory demonstrates that political and social judgments are structured around moral binaries such as loyalty versus betrayal or purity versus corruption (Lakoff, 2002; Haidt, 2012).

In conditions of institutional distrust and information overload, such narratives reduce cognitive complexity and offer emotional stability. Importantly, they also legitimize political disengagement, rule-breaking, or symbolic resistance by framing these actions as morally justified responses to perceived injustice.

Disinformation as a Bonding Mechanism

Contrary to deficit models, empirical research shows that misinformation often functions as a **social glue** rather than a failure of knowledge. Shared belief in stigmatized or “forbidden” information signals in-group loyalty and reinforces collective identity (Sunstein, 2017). Institutions are reframed as corrupt or manipulative, while believers are cast as morally courageous truth-seekers.

Emotions such as fear, anger, and moral outrage play a central role in this process. These emotions synchronize group identity more efficiently than rational agreement, making disinformation resilient to factual correction. As a result, fact-checking alone frequently intensifies resistance by threatening group identity and reinforcing in-group/out-group dynamics.



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The Lithuanian Case: Trust, Narratives, and Digital Polarization

Institutional Trust Profile in Lithuania: Narrative Vulnerabilities



Lithuania exhibits a hybrid trust regime characterized by moderate-to-low trust in political parties, parliament, and national media, alongside comparatively high trust in close interpersonal networks. Trust in the European Union tends to exceed trust in domestic institutions, reflecting perceptions of external procedural legitimacy versus internal elite capture.

This configuration reflects enduring post-Soviet skepticism toward state authority, where formal institutions are tolerated but not fully internalized as legitimate, while informal networks remain primary sources of security and meaning.

A recurring feature of Lithuanian misinformation is the **simulation of institutional authority**. Disinformation actors frequently circulate fabricated or manipulated documents, screenshots, and pseudo-official statements designed to mimic state or international organizations. For example, forged documents presented as official government materials have been disseminated on Facebook to suggest hidden policy agendas or secret agreements

Such practices reflect a broader post-Soviet pattern in which institutions are perceived as formally legitimate but substantively untrustworthy. As a result, claims framed as “leaked,”



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“suppressed,” or “what they don’t want you to know” gain credibility precisely because they bypass official communication channels.

COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Epistemic Fragmentation: Disinformation Narratives

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated epistemic fragmentation in Lithuania by transforming public health communication into a moral and identity-based battleground. Institutional messaging emphasizing uncertainty, evolving evidence, and collective responsibility struggled to compete with emotionally compelling misinformation narratives circulating in social media ecosystems.

One prominent example involved Facebook posts claiming that Lithuania had signed secret agreements with the World Health Organization (WHO) aimed at “reducing the population,” particularly among older people. These posts generated hundreds of reactions and comments, despite being factually false. In reality, Lithuania, as a WHO member state, has endorsed frameworks on healthy and active ageing focused on reducing social exclusion and improving access to education and digital services for older adults. The disinformation narrative inverted these goals, reframing social inclusion policies as covert population control.

Saulės Vaikas
2025 m. Gruodis 23 d. · 🌐

Ar žinojote, jog Lietuva(galimai) yra pasirašiusi sutartį su PSO , kurioje numatytas Žmonių skaičiaus mažinimas?

791 Reakcijos · 339 Komentarai · 88 Bendrinimai

Patinka · Komentuoti · Bendrinti

Valda Budriene
Seniai viskas ne tik pasirašyta, bet ir vykdoma! Visi vykdytojai nupirkti už didelius pinigus ir patupdyti į postus su nuorodom ir planu kaip naikinti Lietuvą...Mes ne tik ays, dar ir naivūs
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 544 🙌
Žr. visus atsakymus (14)

Kestas Kestas
Lietuvos valdžia paklusniai vykdo nurodymus . Per madingą ligą , praplėtė krematorių skaičių Lietuvoje
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 162 🙌
Žr. visus atsakymus (3)

Marijana Litvinienė
Aš puikiai prisimenu Vytauto Landsbergio žodžius per pandemiją pasakė, žemėje žmonių yra per daug , Žemėje padėkos,kai žmonių sumažės...
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 92 🙌
Žr. visus atsakymus (8)

Gina Kryžiuviene
Marijana Litvinienė o pats vis kapstosi ,nori iki 100m gyventi ,kodėl nelengvina tos žemės savo buvimu
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 25 🙌

Danutė A-tė
Marijana Litvinienė tai tegu ir mažina kiniečius, ten per viršų bėga net, mes ir taip, kaip augalai per šliužus, nykstate. Mokyklos uždamos, kad vaiką pagimdyt, turi bepročių akušerių iniršį atlaikyt (joms gal daugiausiai už mažinimą moka), kapeikytes gauni, kol augini, o kainos tokios, kad augint prabanga. Nykstate, svetimėjame ir vis labiau nirstame viens ant kito.
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 15 🙌

Rimantas Nera
Marijana Litvinienė
Kaip jūs tiesiogiai viską suprantat, čia sarkazmas
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 5 🙌
Žr. atsakymus (1)

Bronius Strolis
Marijana Litvinienė Šita idijota kaip žemė ji laiko vagi mūsų tėvins
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 3 🙌

Jas Bira
Marijana Litvinienė bet pats V.L. tai nesiruošia išeiti, nors ir žino, kad perdaug žmonių, tik kitus laukia, kad išeitų.
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 1 🙌

Kęstutis Navickas
Marijana Litvinienė Gal kai kuriose šalise ir tikrai daug. Na mūsų tikrai nedaug.
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 3 🙌
Pasirinkta parinktis „Aktualiausi“, todėl kai kurie atsakymai galėjo būti išfiltruoti.

Atsakyti Marijana Litvinienė

Valdemaras Nemanius
1000%,nes bepročiai prieš tai valdė,o kas daroma ir buvo padaryta,tai plika akimi juk matoma, demonai valdo pardavę sielas!
6 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 78 🙌

Egidijus Malinauskas
Ne vien LT.... O beveik visos pasaulio šalys....

Another widely circulated claim asserted that COVID-19 vaccines could “treat cancer” or, in some variations, were experimental tools deliberately harming specific population groups .



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These narratives blended partial truths (e.g., ongoing research into immunotherapy) with false causal claims, exploiting scientific complexity and public uncertainty. Rather than rejecting science outright, such narratives repositioned “alternative experts” as morally trustworthy truth-tellers in contrast to allegedly corrupt medical institutions.

Importantly, these examples illustrate that misinformation did not merely challenge factual claims; it **redefined moral authority**. Trust was relocated from formal public health institutions to peer communities and influencers who framed resistance as ethical self-defense against unjust authority.

Paulius Skomantas įrašas

Panašu, kad farmacijos kompanijos griebiasi paskutinio šiaudo, bandydamos kaip nors žmonėms įbrukti tas vakcinas...

Noriu paklausti, ar čia, tarp mano FB bičiulių yra kas nors, kas tiki, kad Covid vakcinos gydo vėžį? Ar yra tikiu, kurie tiki, kad šiemet, rugsėjo mėnesio pradžioje, kai temperatūra lauke buvo +20/+25 C°, žmonės tikrai masiškai sirgo Covidu ir pildėsi ligoninės, poliklinikos reikėjo įvesti apribojimus? Ar yra manančių, kad žiniasklaidos pranešimai apie “šiemet kaip niekada piktą ir pavojingą” Covid atmainą - yra tiesa?

Aš, važinėdamas po visą Lietuvą, aplankydamas daugybę ugdymo įstaigų, bendraudamas su mokytojais, vadovais, seniai susidariau nuomonę, kad tuose žiniasklaidos pranešimuose - labai daug melo.

O dažniausiu atveju - vien melas.

Covidas - tai PELNINGAS VERSLAS.

Ir žiniasklaidai su savo melais vis “įpilant žibalo į ugnį”, toliau dedamos visos įmanomos pastangos, kad tas verslas neštų dividendus.

Onkologus nustebino COVID-19 vakcinos: turi netikėtą poveikį

15 m. lapkričio 4 d. 05:49

COVID-19 vakcinos poveikis nustebino onkologus

Sekundė
2025 m. lapkričio 2 d. 17:00

Onkologus nustebino COVID-19 vakcinos: turi netikėtą poveikį

12 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 25

Danguolė Jablonskienė
Pauliau, sutinku su Tavim 100%! Tai yra TIK milžiniškas farmacininkų biznesis. Niekio jos negydo! Iki Covid vakcinų aš net gripu nesirgau! Po trijų vakcinų (pasiskiepyti mane vertė darbe, nes JK tai buvo privaloma, dirbant su žmonėmis) aš 4 kartus sirgau!! Imuninė sistema pilnai atsistatė tik po metų. Nuodai! Pasakiau darbe, kad niekada daugiau neileisiu savęs nuodyti, net jei teks palikti darbą! Ačiū, kad iškeli šią problemą

13 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 60

Atsakė: Paulius Skomantas · Atsakymų: 7

Margarita Zirgule
Jau kas kas, bet onkologai pasakys, kaip vėžio apimty šovė su šiomis vakcinomis. Bet kurioje ligoninėje tą išgirsite, ne tik iš gydytojų, bet ir medicinos darbuotojų. Vieša paslaptis.

13 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 102

Žr. visus atsakymus (3)

Reda Jacikevičienė · Stebėti
Tokios antraštės tik patvirtina, kad vakcinos nuo Covid-19 nebuvo ištirtos ir yra eksperimentinės!

13 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 79

Žr. visus atsakymus (8)

Ina Tyla
Netikiu žiniasklaida, televizoriaus nežūriu, nesiskiepijus. Tai melas ir apgaule.

13 sav. Patinka Atsakyti 65

Geopolitics, Patriotism, and Selective Trust: Hyper-National Disinformation

Lithuania’s strong geopolitical consensus regarding security threats, particularly in relation to Russia, coexists with persistent distrust toward domestic political elites. This tension has enabled the emergence of disinformation narratives that are not anti-national but explicitly **hyper-national**.

A salient example concerns disinformation surrounding the planned military training polygon in Kapčiamiestis. Social media narratives framed the project as a betrayal of local communities, environmental destruction, or evidence of foreign control over Lithuanian territory, while simultaneously invoking patriotic language and national symbols. Although



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official sources linked elements of the campaign to Russian information operations, the narratives gained traction precisely because they aligned with pre-existing distrust of domestic governance rather than overtly pro-Russian messaging.



Similarly, forged documents and manipulated posts have been used to suggest that Lithuanian political elites secretly prioritize foreign interests over national sovereignty. These narratives cast believers as “true patriots” defending the nation against internal corruption. In this framing, dissent is not only legitimate but morally obligatory.

Trust thus becomes highly selective: abstract commitments to national survival and identity remain strong, while trust in concrete governance processes, policy decisions, and institutional communication remains weak.

Online Communities as Narrative Enclaves: Social Costs of Disbelief

Lithuanian digital spaces—particularly Facebook groups and Telegram channels—function as narrative enclaves in which misinformation is sustained through repetition, moral reinforcement, and social sanctioning. Participation in these communities often entails implicit loyalty tests: questioning dominant narratives risks exclusion, ridicule, or moral condemnation.



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The repeated circulation of claims about WHO population control, vaccine conspiracies, or secret military agreements demonstrates that verification is secondary to narrative coherence and group belonging. Disinformation strengthens social cohesion by embedding belief within identity and collective grievance rather than empirical assessment. Exit from such communities becomes socially costly, reinforcing narrative stability even in the face of external correction.

These Lithuanian examples demonstrate that misinformation operates less as isolated falsehoods and more as **identity-affirming narratives** embedded in historically conditioned trust relations. The persistence of these narratives cannot be explained by lack of access to information alone. Instead, they reflect a structural realignment of trust toward peer-based moral communities that offer recognition, belonging, and a sense of agency in an uncertain institutional landscape.

Implications for Adult Education Practice

Reframing the Pedagogical Problem

For adult educators, misinformation should be understood as a relational and moral phenomenon rather than a purely cognitive error. Interventions that implicitly frame learners as “misinformed” or morally deficient risk reinforcing resistance and humiliation.

The primary pedagogical goal should not be persuasion or ideological conversion, but the reduction of moral hostility and the restoration of epistemic humility.

Practical Recommendations for Adult Educators

1. **Prioritize psychological safety.** Establish clear procedural rules that prohibit shaming and moral superiority. Trust in the learning process must precede engagement with contested content.
2. **Focus on cognitive rather than affective empathy.** Encourage participants to understand how others reason without requiring emotional identification. Narrative exposure and “steel-manning” exercises are particularly effective.
3. **Use structured dialogue formats.** Deliberative and restorative dialogue models outperform open-ended discussion. Require paraphrasing, turn-taking, and clear distinctions between experience and interpretation.
4. **Employ role-playing and perspective inversion.** Simulations that force participants to defend opposing positions destabilize moral certainty and reduce essentialist thinking, provided they avoid caricature or mockery.
5. **Redesign debate formats.** Replace adversarial debate with epistemic debate that rewards uncertainty, revision, and identification of common ground rather than rhetorical dominance.



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6. **Measure relational outcomes, not opinion change.** Indicators of success should include reduced dehumanizing language, increased acknowledgment of uncertainty, and willingness to engage across disagreement.

Conclusion

The Lithuanian case illustrates that misinformation thrives not because individuals lack information, but because shared falsehoods can become morally and socially functional within specific groups. Trust has not disappeared; it has shifted location—from institutions to peer-based epistemic communities that offer belonging, moral clarity, and emotional resonance.

For adult education, this implies that countering misinformation requires more than fact-checking or media literacy in a narrow sense. It demands pedagogical strategies that address identity, moral framing, and relational repair. Rebuilding a shared civic space depends not on eliminating disagreement, but on making disagreement socially survivable.

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