

# The Possible Role of Digital Platforms in Information Operations

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**Abstract:** We have less knowledge of digital platforms in relation to credible information, news, and information operations among young people. While young people use digital platforms, do they consider themselves targets of information operations, false information, and news? The results tell us that young people use various digital platforms as sources of credible information and news. Young participants said they could never fall prey to fake news and information operations while trusting content creators, such as influencers on digital platforms, without verifying their agendas, backgrounds, funding, or motives. No one wondered if, at any point, any influencers might work for a hostile actor, entity, or state. Misinformation and disinformation, or fake news and information operations, did not concern young people. Confirmation biases were never admitted, since young participants trusted their instincts to find truthful information and news. The power of AI, machine learning, algorithms, advertising, bots, and influencers was discussed to a lesser degree. At worst, this has implications for democratic states.

**Keywords:** Information operations, Social media, Internet, Value framing, Influencers

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## 1. Introduction

Young people use digital platforms such as various social media apps, discussion forums, and Internet sites as sources for fun, information, and news, as well as to participate globally and locally (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018; Pietilä, 2022; Oser et al., 2013; Meriläinen, 2021; 2022). User-centric research and design of the digital platforms enable a better experience and usability (Pietilä, 2022; Pietilä et al., 2019Ma). Together with artificial intelligence (AI) and various other digital means, the possibilities to connect and make an impact are vast. Young people can connect, participate in varying degrees, and find, create, and consume entertainment, information, and news. Young people claim ownership of digital platforms and their content (Meriläinen, 2022). Digital platforms also have various negative impacts on youth and the world (Nilan et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2022; Markey et al., 2022; Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003). Yet we have less knowledge of digital platforms in relation to credible information, news, and information operations among young people. While young people use digital platforms, do they consider themselves easily misled by false information and news, or targets of information operations? Shallcross (2017) and Meriläinen (2023) highlighted the need for research on digital platforms and information operations. Related to the topic, this study asks, in their own minds, are young people prone to information operations online? Does confirmation bias play a role in the consumption of content that is deemed credible? What possibilities does this create possibilities for information operations and divisions in societies by local and international hostile actors?

The research questions for this study are:

*RQ1: Who produces credible information and news for young people?*

*RQ2: Is the content on digital platforms considered a source for information operations?*

Next, the related works are presented briefly. This is followed by the introduction of empirical data gathering. Following this, the results, discussion, and conclusions are presented.

## 2. Related Works

### 2.1 Value Framing and Credible Information

Framing is based on values and beliefs that guide every actor's behaviour, thinking, and communication, thus creating various understandings and archetypes (Meriläinen et al., 2023) such as youth and online content creators. This has great importance in creating salience and credibility in connection with confirmation biases, thus seeking credible and trusting information, news, and actors that align with a person's pre-existing values and beliefs. The theoretical choice of combining the fields of communication and political sciences with ICT (information and communication technology) has been made to create a new outlook on digital platforms in relation to confirmation biases, information operations among youth. Personal value framing connects our values and beliefs to the truthful information we sense and how we decode it in our thinking (Brewer and Gross, 2005; Shen and Edwards, 2005; Schemer et al, 2012; Slothuus, 2010). As Banks et al (2021) state that we live in a polarized world with media feeds. Thus, confirmation biases guide us toward the information and

news as well as content creators we trust based on our values and beliefs. Aligned with confirmation bias, value framing affects how people, such as youth, view reality (Brewer and Gross, 2005) and the credibility of digital platforms and content creators as sources of truth and information. Framing is a powerful tool aimed at other actors, such as people, governments, and organizations, and how they view issues, events, and other actors. Please see more: (Lewin, 1947; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Cohen, 1963; Entman, 1993; Kilburn, 2009; Lippmann, 1922; McCombs, 1997; Stone and McCombs, 1981). With their chosen forms of communication, fashion, and behaviour, actors influence others by placing emphasis on chosen language, values, and beliefs, which means that the salience of an actor's language, values, and beliefs are transferred as salient to other actors, who then adopt them as reality in their own thinking. This process is called the transfer of salience in the communication context (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002), where personally salient information and news are shared and believed. These can be used to direct young people to use digital platforms and to consume information from these platforms as truths from chosen content creators, such as influencers worldwide.

## **2.2 Credible Information and Information Operations**

Information operations utilize information as a tool to achieve various endgames. As information is generally regarded as a soft power, it may be most effectively implemented in times other than force-on-force military conflict, where, depending on its intent and objectives, information can be used to inform, persuade, threaten, or confuse audiences (Iasiello, 2017). Although different interpretations exist between academic disciplines, some argue that there is no strict definition of what information is. Information is used to create various realities and influence states, nations, and individuals online and offline (Chochowski, 2022) and is a tool in information operations. In relation to Madden (2000), information does present facts that actors accept as truths if the content aligns with their personal value framing. In addition, believed credible actors and confirmation biases are useful tools in information operations. In some cases, people are forced to accept information and news as truth, for example, by suppression or state- and actor-led power. Moreover, information, who shares it, and how it is perceived and accepted are linked to actors' credibility and the platforms where communication occurs. For example, social media platforms may be credible platforms for various young people (Meriläinen, 2021; 2022), but not for adults. Digital platforms are fertile soil for fake news and information operations (Van Der Linden et al., 2020). Information operations have been discussed in relation to fake news, elections, and social movements (Darraj et al., 2017; Davey et al., 2018; Briant, 2022). These operations are always participatory in nature when people partake in shaping and spreading them and the information they use. Furthermore, information operations are often discussed in the context of military and national defence (Turan, 2018; Thomas, 1998; Cox, 2006) also in social media environments. Yet, as Crawford (1999) says, information operations and warfare are too important to be left to the military. Access to digital networks creates a downward adjustment of established power differentials at all levels of society (Crawford, 1999). Content creators may be an alluring part of these operations.

In information operations, various types of information, including disinformation and misinformation, are disseminated through various forms of communication and platforms, both online and offline. Disinformation is false information that is deliberately intended to mislead and make untrue facts, while misinformation is false or inaccurate information where facts are wrong (APA, 2023). These can be combined and called fake news. Weedon et al (2017) define them as actions taken by organized actors, such as governments or non-state actors, to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome. Information operations can use a combination of methods, for example, disinformation, false news, or networks of fake accounts aimed at manipulating public opinion (Weedon et al, 2017). Starbird et al (2019) argue that online information operations are participatory in nature, where messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers. Much like strategic communication, which uses framing, Starbird et al (2019) assert that strategic information operations are efforts by individuals and groups, including state and non-state actors, to manipulate public opinion and change, while others associate them with elections (Darraj et al, 2017; Davey et al, 2018). These operations are a global phenomenon with political, social, psychological, educational, and cybersecurity dimensions (Starbird et al, 2019). Referring to Hyman and Sheatsley's (1947) study on why information campaigns can sometimes fail, modern information campaigns and information operations do not vary much from theories on information campaigns since they are dependent on prior attitudes and beliefs. While young people are active online, how, if at all, do they regard information operations and do they fall for them?

### 3. Empirical Research Setting

This research relies on empirical data produced by young people. The empirical data comes from explorative empirical research conducted with vocational schools in  $n=8$  municipalities in Western, Central, and Eastern Finland during February 2021–February 2024. During this explorative empirical research phase,  $n=366$  young vocational school students between the ages of 16 and 29 were invited to be anonymous and volunteer research participants. Young participants produced the empirical data for this research either in written or spoken form in  $n=53$  research workshops. The results of this study are drawn from empirical data via qualitative content analysis to formulate an understanding of how young vocational secondary school students regard information, news, actors, various digital platforms, and their perceptions of credibility and information operations. Research permits were granted by either vocational schools or cities and by the anonymous research participants.

Authors such as Pietilä et al. (2021) and Lazar et al. (2010) discuss the different ways to apply interviews and open discussion with young people in the realms of HCI (human-computer interaction) and multidisciplinary research. This research is qualitative and explorative in nature. Please see the in-depth look at the data gathering on Meriläinen (2022; 2021). Explorative research can be defined as a study with the intention of generating evidence that is needed to decide whether to proceed to the next phase of the research (Hallingberg et al., 2018). The explorative research method was chosen to develop multidisciplinary research protocols to conduct research with the youth, based on limited power relations between the adult researcher from the university and the young participants. To respect the young people's anonymity, their names, fields of study, and the names of the participating municipalities are not stated here. In this age of digital platforms, bullying, harassment, and violence, there is a possibility that the young participants could be identified using open-source information.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the theoretical and empirical multidisciplinary research show that young research participants value the idea of the Nordic democratic state while using various digital platforms to shape their understanding of facts and fiction. Everyone out of all the  $n=366$  volunteer research participants, from liberals to conservative Christians, used various digital platforms as a source for credible information and news as well as to participate politically. The most credible, trustworthy, and used platforms were Instagram, Discord, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, and various other message boards and Internet pages, as well as gaming. Often these were used together; while gaming on one screen, social media platforms, such as TikTok and Discord, were open on another screen where credible content was consumed and shared. Several Finnish and international influencers, ranging from liberals to conservatives, were sources of credible information and news. Influencers were regarded as being a new generation of politicians who are on the side of the youth, while officials, traditional media, and journalists were not. The possible deception by influencers, or them being used as useful idiots in information operations, was not detected. Rather, it was seen as impossible.

Young research participants relied on a certain archetype of themselves as "us" aligned with trusted influencers, while adults, officials, journalists, and mainstream traditional media presented the archetype of "them," the ones fundamentally against the youth. Misinformation, disinformation, or information operations did not concern young people. They did not perceive themselves as targets for these. They said they could distinguish truth from fiction. Faith in one's ability to utilize critical media literacy was strong. They explain that they are native Internet and social media users, while claiming that people over 40 years old are not. Thus, people over 40 years old can be targets of information operations, while youth cannot.

Confirmation bias was never discussed. Yet, the truths were always aligned with existing personal values and beliefs. Confirmation biases were always denied when I specifically asked about them. However, based on the empirical data, confirmation biases guided the usage of digital platforms and the information and content creators the research participants trusted. Yet, the power of AI, algorithms, advertising machine learning, and bots was discussed, but only to some degree. AI and algorithms were seen as a means of personal and political control and coercion by those in power, so-called the global elite or the World Economic Forum, which kept people under control. A few young participants said that they have no other choice but to consume forced, false, and outdated information because AI and algorithms keep "people under control by force."

Young participants said they could never fall prey to fake news and information operations while trusting influencers on digital platforms without verifying their agendas, backgrounds, funding, or motives. No one wondered if, at any point, any influencers might work for hostile actors, entities, or states. This issue must be

further researched in the coming months. Credibility and trust were related to: 1) the person's own values and beliefs; 2) the content creators' credibility; 3) the usability of the platforms; and 4) the credibility of the digital platforms. User-centric design (Pietilä, 2022) and framing of actors' communication hold an enormous advantage in reaching young people. This opens the door for future research in HCI and information operations.

The deception on digital platforms goes beyond consuming or being targets of false information. It forces you to become something you are not by using AI technology and filters to alter your looks and behaviour to better fit the current fashionable (western) standards of beauty, behaviour, and truth. There is indeed a need for discussions of normative values and beliefs in the era of fake news, information operations, the power of influencers, Trumpism, and institutionalized disregard for human rights. At least in the Global North, policymakers seem to pay lip service to the global threat of information operations on digital platforms, or it extends to simply condemning TikTok or Meta. Simultaneously, companies continue to facilitate grave abuses of human rights, create platforms for information operations, and make a handsome profit. Meanwhile, young participants laughed at entertaining content and filters on digital platforms while consuming content tailored to them on the FYP (For You Page) via algorithms.

Based on the empirical data, influencers on various digital platforms have a strong influence on young people. These actors may work independently, as a collective, or for someone else. They may simply build a personal brand in an individualistic world. Or they may also receive funding and directives from unknown actors or states. Young people look for help, truths, information, and role models on digital platforms and participate politically locally and globally online. They trust entertaining information tailored to match their values and beliefs without acknowledging any confirmation biases. They do not trust content creators that do not match their social or political belief systems. Information produced by the so-called wrong side is inherently disregarded as fake news. Here are the vast possibilities for actors wanting to conduct small- or large-scale information operations: With the help of user-centric design and focus research coupled with algorithms, AI, and bots, at best, various actors can create credible and entertaining content that corresponds with the biases, values, and beliefs of young people from various backgrounds. This has enormous potential for influencing societies via information operations, which are not regarded as warfare that can threaten democratic development of states.

The transfer of information and news (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002; Roberts et al., 2002) from various online platforms was evident. Young participants said they accepted the information and news from digital platforms as truth if they believed it to be true, if their friends liked it, and if the content creator was entertaining, credible, and seemed to be speaking the truth. The same applies to fake news (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017); it is accepted if it *feels* right personally. Indeed, the empirical results correlate with the theoretical framework that people believe information to be true based on their personal value framing. Information must also come from trusted sources (Brewer and Gross, 2005; Shen and Edwards, 2005; Schemer et al., 2012; Slothuus, 2010; Meriläinen and Vos, 2013). Entertainment is a strong attribute for creating credible information and news online. Similar results were found in the earlier research (Meriläinen, 2021), which coincides with Granholm (2016) and Pietilä (2022), who argued that young people use digital platforms to be active and as part of their everyday lives. Young participants connect their online and offline lives and activities. Social media and the Internet were discussed often as one entity. Only after being asked, the young participants specified which digital platforms they used.

The power of influencers, for example, on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, is enormous for young people. They are seen as idols, entertaining, and credible in the world, where grownups are trying to diminish and downplay the viability and smartness of young participants. Influencers communicate in ways that are understandable and relatable to young people. This may mean communication, for example, behaviour, looks, the tone of voice, Internet slang, or visual styles ranging from entertaining to serious and everything in between. Moreover, several attributes affect the credibility of online influencers, such as credibility and attractiveness (Balaban and Mustăţea, 2019). These enable extensive and versatile information operations if the content is created to appeal to young people from various backgrounds and political ideologies. Young people feel like they are being attacked, not by information operations but by adults over 40 years old. This is where the power of influencers on digital platforms lies. They can connect with young people in ways that parents, teachers, journalists, and officials cannot. The roles of fashion, behaviour, and credibility as well as user-centric design should not be overlooked when researching digital platforms, information operations, and the future of democratic development of societies globally.

According to Mejova et al. (2020), in the online world, different narratives, news, and actors from fields ranging from politics to business are competing for clicks. Previously, young people argued that anything goes online as long as you get clicks. (Meriläinen, 2022; 2023). Information operations are complicated and complex projects that aim to impose one's perception of reality on the other side of conflict (Chochowski, 2022). Indeed, information operations do not choose political or social sides but have, for example, utilised social media to promote various causes, from #blacklivesmatter to #bluelivesmatter (Briant, 2022). Starbird et al. (2019) argued that online information operations are participatory in nature, where messages spread through—and with the help of—online crowds and other information providers. In addition, Briant (2022) stated that during the US 2016 elections, Russia conducted various information operations by creating clandestine accounts, while others may have infiltrated social and political movements, such as the #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter movements. Thus, information operations do not need to create new divisions but rather utilise existing divisions and discourses in their operative tactics, which can have lasting effects on democratic societies. Based on these results, the divisions are between youth and adults, which creates a vast possibility for information operations. Young people believe and spread the content they consume online. They may thus spread content, which is part of information operations, as part of larger hybrid operations. As young people were involved in various political movements, from liberals to conservative Christians, they were willing to act on behalf of their ideology. The arena for information and actions was firstly digital. When pressed about the truthfulness of their values, beliefs, and ideologies, most of the participants noted that everything is online, thus their political actions and audiences are there. Once you have your own truth and audience set online, you can start the movement offline. Thus, in this way, the online and offline worlds come together.

However, while relying heavily on digital platforms and content creators, some young participants were nonetheless critical of various digital platforms. Pages like Reddit or Wikipedia were not to be trusted since anyone could add and edit the content. Also, social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok were considered dangerous because nothing is real or to be trusted because of fake news, deep fakes, opinions framed as truthful information, and other negative effects such as bullying and hate speech. Here we have a dichotomy. As earlier research (Meriläinen, 2022) argued, young people noted that both traditional print and social media can be used as propaganda either by the state or by the editorial and "owning classes." This critique did not explicitly expand to content creators such as influencers on digital platforms. Online influencers were seen as free of outside money, or "the owning class" or World Economic Forum. While information operations are sociotechnical phenomena that rely on a variety of actors and structures to successfully disseminate problematic kinds of information (Arif and Wilson, 2019), the reality of misinformation and disinformation was not fundamental for the young participants. The role of algorithms was discussed by a handful of research participants. For these young people, algorithms were stronger than their own will to not consume the content online. Most commonly, the algorithms on Google and YouTube raised questions among young participants. Critical media literacy must be further studied in the future. Although in the large minority, some young participants noticed they were being directly influenced on particular social media, such as Instagram or TikTok, by known influencers and unknown actors such as AI or bots. A few young participants despised these unknown actors and their motives. Those belonging to this minority stated that algorithms, AI, or bots were unknown to them, yet they made them consume information and various goods, such as podcasts and content, online. This content then provided forcefully trusted information for young participants. Yet, they did not have the means to further elaborate on how they are influenced or to so-called fight these powerful actors.

To conclude, based on the empirical data, content creators such as influencers from various political sides, coupled with the right kind of fashion, behaviour, communication, user-centric research, AI, algorithms, bots, ads, and entertainment, as well as endless funding, have a strong influence on young people. These actors may work independently or for someone else. They may receive funding and directives from unknown actors or states in attempts to shake democratic states as part of hybrid operations. Young people look for truth and information role models on digital platforms. They trust information tailored to match their values and beliefs without admitting any confirmation biases towards influencers, information, or news online. Here are the vast possibilities for actors wanting to conduct small- or large-scale information operations: This has enormous potential for influencing societies and can, at worst, threaten democratic states and values for decades.

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