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Debunking a politically motivated rumour on Reddit: the context of the 2024 U.S. Republican presidential campaign

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to elaborate on the picture of the informational credibility of rumours and the ways in which false political rumours are debunked in online discussion.

Design/methodology/approach – Descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative content analysis of 1,775 posts submitted to 37 Reddit discussion threads focussing on the debunking of the rumour about pet eating among Haitian immigrants during the 2024 U.S. Republican presidential campaign. It was examined how and by what criteria the online participants debunked the rumour.

Findings – The participants employed seven approaches to rumour debunking: (1) drawing on prior refutations of the rumour; (2) presenting personal opinion about the rumour; (3) condemning rumourmongering; (4) demanding responsibility from rumourmongers; (5) indicating negative consequences of rumour dissemination; (6) joking about the rumour and its disseminators and (7) expressing emotional reactions. In rumour debunking, person-related criteria such as the honesty of the rumour disseminator were particularly significant, while criteria dealing with the content of the rumour, for example, the provision of evidence, were used less frequently. The findings suggest that rumour debunking occurring in online discussion draws heavily on the participants' personal opinions, as well as appeals dealing with the blameworthiness of rumour dissemination.

Research limitations/implications – As the study focusses on a sample of posts dealing with a particular rumour, the findings cannot be generalized to concern the rumour debunking occurring in online discussions.

Originality/value – The study pioneers by providing an in-depth analysis of the rumour debunking in online discussion. The findings highlight the significance of opinion-based approaches to rumour debunking.

Keywords Debunking of rumour, Information sharing, Online discussion, Political information, Political rumour, Rumour

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Rumour is a type of mis- or disinformation to which insufficient attention has been paid in information behaviour research so far. In general, rumours can be defined as "unverified information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat" (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007, pp. 19–20). A recent example of contexts of this kind is COVID-19 pandemic which gave rise to numerous rumours about its origin (Guo *et al*., 2025). One of the domains in which rumours proliferate is politics (Kwak *et al*., 2020). This is particularly the case in times of significant political events such as presidential elections. For example, during Barack Obama's campaign for president in 2008, rumours were spread about that Obama is secretly Muslim (Layman *et al*., 2014). The assessment of the credibility of political rumours of this kind is a demanding task because falsity is not a defining characteristic of rumour (Fine, 2007, p. 6). Rumours can be true, false or something in

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between. Since the 1990s, professional fact-checking services such as *PolitiFact* and *Snopes* have made attempts to verify or refute political rumours (Savolainen, 2024). In addition, online discussion forums offer possibilities to debunk false political rumours (Edy and Risley-Baird, 2016). To achieve this, online communities may identify factual inaccuracies in the rumours and offer counterevidence.

The present investigation contributes to information behaviour research by examining how politically motivated false rumours are debunked in online discussion. To this end, a sample of 37 Reddit discussion threads with 1755 posts focussing on a rumour distributed during the 2024 U.S. Republican presidential campaign were analysed. An attempt was made to find out how the online participants debunked unverified statements claiming that Haitian immigrants living in Springfield, Ohio steal and eat pets. The rumour was politically motivated because it was spread to boost the Republican presidential campaign by persuading voters with a critical view on illegal migration. To this end, the Republican Vice President Nominee J.D. Vance and President Nominee Donald Trump were particularly active in distributing the "pet" rumour. The findings of the present study deepen our understanding about the informational credibility of political rumours, specify the ways in they are approached in online discussion and demonstrate how and by which criteria such rumours are debunked.

The article proceeds as follows. First, in order to create background, the concept of rumour is characterized in greater detail, followed by a review of studies on political rumours and their debunking. Thereafter, the research framework and the empirical research setting will be specified, followed by the report of the findings. The last sections discuss the research results and reflect their significance.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualisations of rumour

In general, rumours can be understood as "extra-factual sources of information in that they are either unverified or unverifiable at the time of transmission" (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017, p. 661). Therefore, the recipient of a rumour does not quite know whether or not to take it seriously (Michelson and Mouly, 2004, p. 191). This is because the initiation of rumour may be underpinned by some element of "truth", no matter how obscure the evidence. As rumours are intended to influence their recipients' attitudes and behaviour, rumours often take the form of emotionally resonant narratives (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017, p. 661). An effective rumour is characterized by simplicity: it uses only one central idea as a core and is thus easy to remember. Effective rumours are also vivid so that they stimulate mental pictures with strong emotional content (Becket, 1988, pp. 331–332). Early attempts to define the features of rumour include the typology developed by Knapp (1944, pp. 23–24). P*ipe dreams* express wishes and desires of those among whom they circulate, while *bogies* are derived from people's fears and anxieties. *Wedge drivers* are aggression rumours motivated by hatred, and they aim at dividing people. A rumour of this type is toned with derogation, blame, or attack towards a specific target group. The claims about pet eating among Haitian immigrant communities exemplify wedge-driving rumours.

Similar to rumours in general, *political rumours* can incorporate both truthful and untrustworthy information. On the continuum ranging from "certain truth" to "certain falsehood", however, political rumours tend to be towards the "certain falsehood" end of the spectrum (Mlambo and Zimunya, 2016, p. 148). In addition to the veracity of the political rumours, they vary regarding the extent to which they are benign or harmful (Schneider, 2023, pp. 185–186). Political rumours are not necessarily harmless narratives. In the worst case, hostile wedge-driving rumours can persuade neutral audiences to turn against a group of people, for example, migrants and unleash chaos in a community (Garrett, 2011; Petersen *et al.*, 2023).

There are several cases showing how racial-, ethnic- and religion centred wedge-driving rumours can have negative political consequences. For example, in times of the US 2008

presidential election, about three in five Americans had heard the false rumour that President Obama is not a natural-born American citizen, which would render him ineligible to hold the presidency (Berinsky, 2023). A related rumour during the 2008 presidential election asserted that Barack Obama is secretly Muslim, despite news stories, fact-checking Web sites, and the words of Obama himself in televised interviews where he described his Christian faith (Hollander, 2010, p. 55). The above rumours fell on fertile ground because many Americans tend to exhibit antipathy towards cultural "out-groups" (Layman *et al.*, 2014, p. 535). On the other hand, despite their public refutation, wedge-driving rumours tend to be durable and relatively resilient to debunking efforts. This is due to political rumours often circulating within online "echo chambers" defined by political homophily (Shin *et al.*, 2017). That is, like-minded people continue to propagate politically motivated rumours, despite the emergence of countervailing information".

2.2 Rumour debunking

In general, *debunking* refers to the act of exposing the falsehood, inaccuracy, or unreliability of widely accepted or circulated viewpoints, theories, or rumours (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Debunking involves providing evidence, logical reasoning, or empirical data to reveal the truth, correct misconceptions, and eliminate trust in erroneous beliefs. Debunking messages serve as persuasive information that aims to rectify misconceptions and diminish rumour credence. Paek and Hove (2019) identified three approaches to rumour debunking. *Denial* is simply a direct counterstatement to the original rumour without supporting evidence, whereas *refutation* involves countering the rumour with factual evidence. Finally, the *attack* approach includes responses that contain threatening information or potential punishments directed at rumourmongers. The debunking of rumours is dependent on how people judge their credibility. The extent to which a rumour is believed is dependent on argument quality, that is, the rumour recipient's perception of the strength of the information within a rumour (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the rumour receiver's perception of the rumour sender's competence and trustworthiness affects the credibility of a political rumour (Yin *et al.*, 2018). In addition, the evidence offered by the rumour sender influences the believability of a rumour; for example, videos can be effective in this regard (Lin *et al.*, 2022, p. 1330).

False political rumours are often debunked by the media and professional fact-checking services such as *PolitiFact* and *Snopes* (Savolainen, 2024). In addition, online discussion forums enable the exchange of ideas and opinions, as participants evaluate rumours, persuading others to refute them (Kwak *et al.*, 2020). For example, eyewitnesses can offer powerful counterevidence if they submit posts to online forums, drawing on their longtime observations suggesting that a political rumour is baseless (Edy and Risley-Baird, 2016, pp. 596–597). Using Reddit data from 2007 to 2015, Dang *et al.* (2016) examined how users respond to political rumours in social media. The study focussed on the false rumour "Obama is Muslim", due to its persistence and popularity. The findings indicate that the online participants approached the rumour in three major ways: supporting it, refuting it, or joking about it. Users supporting the Obama rumour usually posted only short comments containing no evidence or explanation (Dang *et al.*, 2016, pp. 781–782). In contrast, those refuting the rumour provided facts and in-depth explanations. Finally, users joking about the rumour usually made sarcastic comments to indicate that the rumour should not be taken seriously. More recently, Zhang *et al.* (2024) examined the persuasiveness of cognitive versus affective appeals in debunking false rumours about COVID-19. The results indicated that cognitive appeals, including argument adequacy, evidence quality, and source credibility, as well as affective appeals such as emotional arousal significantly influenced debunking message persuasiveness.

2.3 The pet rumour

The present study examines the debunking of the politically motivated rumour which was disseminated during the 2024 U.S. Republican presidential campaign. Starting in the beginning

of September 2024, claims spread online that Haitian (illegal) immigrants were stealing and eating pets in Springfield, Ohio. The claims began with a local Facebook group post asserting that a local cat had been butchered. The claim spread quickly among far-right online groups. Somewhat later, the author of the original Facebook post and the neighbour who told her the story admitted that it was based on a rumour from people with whom they had not spoken (Brewster and Howard, 2024). In addition, the pet rumour was debunked by officials and professional fact-checking services. Springfield City Manager Bryan Heck called the rumour disinformation, while Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, a Republican, rebuked the rumour, saying, "This is a piece of garbage that is simply not true. There's no evidence of this at all." He also emphasized that these (Haitian) "people are here legally" (Picciotto, 2024). Similarly, the Police in Springfield announced that there is no evidence to support the rumour (Chatelain, 2024). Snopes – a fact-checking service – analysed a video footage authentically documenting an incident in which a Haitian immigrant in Springfield ate a cat. Snopes found out that an Ohio woman who was accused of the killing and eating of the cat is not an immigrant, not Haitian and not from Springfield. Therefore, the rumour was rated as "False" (Kasprak, 2024).

Notwithstanding, the pet rumour was politicized and it was taken as an asset in the Republican presidential campaign. On 10 September 2024, Vice-Presidential Nominee J.D. Vance wrote that "in the last several weeks, my office has received many enquiries from actual residents of Springfield who've said their neighbours' pets or local wildlife were abducted by Haitian migrants. It's possible, of course, that all of these rumours will turn out to be false." Despite this reservation, Vance encouraged supporters to continue posting and "keep the cat memes flowing" (Maher, 2024). The rumour was also disseminated by Donald Trump. During the Harris – Trump presidential debate on September 10, Trump claimed that "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there" (Mangan *et al.*, 2024). Despite many news outlets debunking these claims after the debate, Vance continued to amplify them, posting multiple pieces of misleading evidence in support. In a September 15 interview, Vance again defended the claims, saying they were "the first-hand accounts of my constituents", while also acknowledging that they were false, calling them a meme (Garrett, 2024). Despite the debunking efforts, the rumour continued to spread and led to serious consequences. Springfield City received dozens of bomb threats accompanied by anti-Haitian messages, targeting schools, hospitals, government buildings, and businesses (Taylor, 2024).

3. Research framework

The literature review indicated that rumours represent information sources that as emotionally resonant narratives offer unverified or unverifiable statements about an issue. Hostile political rumours functions as wedge drivers which can lead to serious social consequences. To fight false political rumours, the media, professional fact-checking services and participants of online communities make attempts to debunk baseless claims of this kind. In order to examine the role of online communities in rumour debunking in greater detail, an empirical study was made by focussing on the ways in which *Redditors* – the registered participants of Reddit discussion threads debunked the politically motivated rumour about Haitian immigrants stealing and eating pets.

While developing the research framework, the findings of prior studies on rumour debunking were used, complemented by categories inductively identified from the empirical data. Guided by prior studies on the topic, the research framework of the present investigation is based on the assumption that rumour debunking occurring in online communities incorporates two major constituents. First, online participants make use of one or more *approaches to rumour debunking*. Second, the participants justify rumour debunking by drawing on diverse *criteria*.

As to the identification of approaches to rumour debunking, the findings of Paek and Hove (2019) offered a useful point of departure. They demonstrated that online participants make

use of three debunking approaches: denial, refutation and attack. However, the preliminary analysis of the empirical data revealed that taken as whole, these three approaches do not provide a sufficiently nuanced picture of the debunking approaches employed by the Redditors. As explained in the findings section of the present study, the Redditors made use of seven diverse approaches to disprove rumours, including, for example, condemning rumourmongering, indicating negative consequences of rumour dissemination, and expressing emotional reactions. Nevertheless, refutation identified by Paek and Hove appeared to be a constitutive element in their judgements since the Redditors often debunked the pet rumour by simply drawing on the fact that the rumour or similar false claims were already refuted in the media, for example. In the present study, this approach to rumour debunking was named as *drawing on prior refutations*. Paek and Hove (2019) also identified the attack approach. In the Redditors' debunking efforts examined in the present investigation, this requirement manifested itself in the approach named as *demanding responsibility from rumourmongers*. Furthermore, the findings of Dang *et al.* (2016) were used to identify approaches to rumour debunking. The above study found that one of the approaches is joking about the rumour. Accordingly, in the present study, this approach was named as *joking about the rumour and its disseminators*.

The list of approaches to rumour debunking was complemented by categories identified inductively from the empirical data. One of them is *presenting personal opinion about the rumour*. Redditors used this approach while they depicted their own beliefs about why the pet rumour was created and disseminated. Furthermore, the Redditors drew on moral appeals suggesting that rumourmongering is a form of blameworthy action and should therefore be disapproved in society. This approach to rumour debunking was named as *condemning rumourmongering*. Closely related, the Redditors critically characterized the negative consequences of rumour dissemination. This approach was named as *indicating negative consequences of rumourmongering*. Finally, the approach of *expressing emotional reactions* was identified from the empirical data. This approach incorporates the expression of negative emotions such as disgust and fear towards rumourmongers.

For the identification of criteria used in rumour debunking, a few prior investigations were particularly relevant. Zhang *et al.* (2024) found that *the provision of evidence* is a significant criterion which is used to debunk political rumours. In this regard, the counterevidence offered by local eyewitnesses can be particularly effective if they can demonstrate that the rumour is baseless (Edy and Risley-Baird, 2016). Moreover, as proposed by Lee and Kim (2022), the *veracity of information* and *source impartiality* are important criteria while debunking false rumours. This is because the extent to which a rumour is taken seriously is dependent on the extent to which a source offering information about a rumour is perceived as offering factual and unbiased information. Lin *et al.* (2022) showed that *argument quality*, that is, perceived strength of the information about the rumour and the nature of reasoning used by rumourmongers is an important criterion used in rumour debunking. As suggested by Yin *et al.* (2018), people also draw attention to the *perceived competence* of the rumourmongers, that is, their abilities to evaluate the nature of the rumour and the consequences of its dissemination. Finally, to substantiate the list of criteria used in rumour debunking, the criterion of *perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator* was identified inductively from the empirical data.

Drawing on the above characterizations, the research framework with an illustrative example taken from a Reddit discussion thread is presented in Figure 1. The framework specifies seven approaches to rumour debunking and six criteria used in the debunking efforts.

Figure 1 suggests rumour debunking in online discussion is initiated by the opening post submitted by Participant 1. As the example taken from a Reddit discussion thread illustrates, the opening post presents a statement about a politically motivated rumour. The discussion starts when Participant 2 reacts to the opening post by presenting his or her judgement about the rumour. To debunk the rumour, he or she can make use of one or more approaches specified in Figure 1, ranging from the drawing on prior refutations to the expressing of emotional

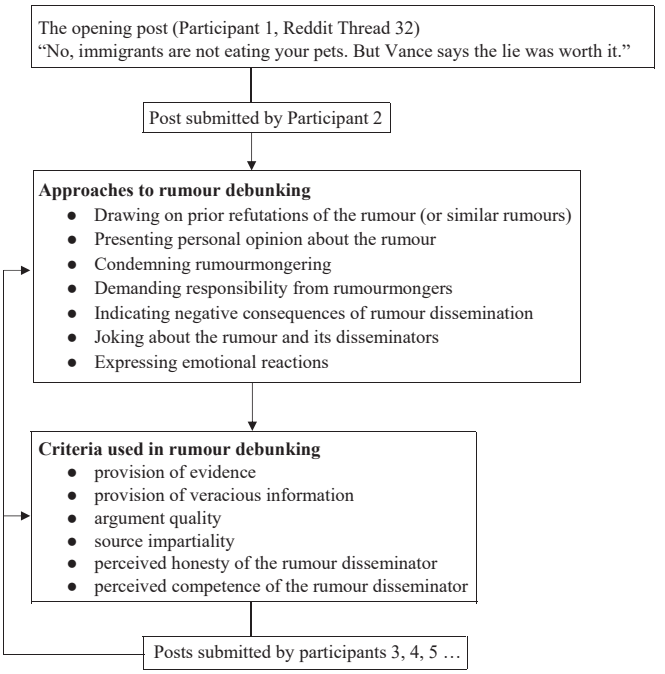

Figure 1. The research framework. Source(s): Created by the author

reactions. He or she can also ground the debunking of the rumour by making use of diverse criteria such as veracity of information and perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator. The discussion goes on when other participants (3, 4, 5 and so on) submit their posts, either reacting to the judgements made by prior participants or offering their own views on the debunking of the rumour.

4. Research questions

Drawing on the research framework presented in Figure 1, the present investigation seeks answers to the following questions.

RQ1. How did the online participants make use of diverse approaches to rumour debunking while discussing the politically motivated claim about pet eating among Haitian immigrants?

RQ2. How did the participants make use of diverse criteria while debunking the above rumour?

5. Empirical data and analysis

The empirical data were gathered from Reddit–a major social media platform founded in 2005 and currently headquartered in San Francisco. Reddit consists of individual forums called *subreddits*, which are mostly user-created and organized by topic of discussion. Subreddits are managed by volunteer moderators who enforce rules for posting. Redditors can join a forum to participate in posting and commenting on others' posts (Eldridge, 2025). As of October 2024, Reddit had an estimated 1.2 billion monthly active users all over the world (Kumar, 2024).

The empirical data were downloaded in the beginning of November 2024 from the subreddit *r/politics* (https://www.reddit.com/r/politics/about/). It was chosen because it focusses on news and discussion about U.S. politics. To obtain an overall picture of politically motivated rumours discussed in the above forum, the discussion threads dealing with rumours spread during the ongoing U.S. presidential campaigns were read tentatively. As most of the rumours discussed by Redditors concentrated on the pet eating issue, it was decided to exclude rumours related to other topics. Thereafter, using the search terms *rumour* AND *pet eating*, altogether 114 potentially relevant discussion threads were identified from the r/politics subreddit. All of them took a critical approach to the pet rumour and made attempts to refute it. Thus, these threads were contributions to the debunking of a politically motivated rumour. As the present investigation focusses on the qualitative analysis of rumour debunking, a smaller sample appeared to be sufficient for the needs of the study. Therefore, using the criterion of data saturation, it was decided to take a subsample of the discussion threads. Data saturation occurs in the gathering of empirical material at the point at which collecting any further data will not produce value-added insights about the matter under investigation (Saunders *et al.*, 2018, p. 1895). The saturation point was reached after taking the 37 first discussion threads from the results list. At this point it became evident that the inclusion of additional threads would not essentially change the qualitative picture of the debunking of the pet rumour. The sample of 37 threads offered a rich variety of posts indicative of how and by which criteria Redditors debunked the rumour.

The 37 discussion threads were initiated in the mid of September 2024 when the pet eating rumour was made public in the media. Examples of the opening posts indicative of the topics of the discussion threads include "JD Vance spreads racist rumor that Haitian immigrants are abducting peoples' pets and eating them" (Thread 5), "Ohio police have no credible reports' of Haitian immigrants harming pets, contradicting JD Vance's claim" (Thread 17), and "Trump thinks Haitians eat dogs. We don't" (Thread 36). The 37 threads contained altogether 1775 posts from the period of 15 September - 31 October 2024. Of them, 37 were initial posts, while 1738 were responses submitted by the Redditors. Altogether 1,160 individual participants contributed to the online discussion. The most active Redditors wrote 49 posts, while the majority of the contributors, that is, 732 participants submitted 1–2 posts. This indicates that most contributors to the discussion threads were occasional participants who were not interested to dig deeper in the rumour debunking. The number of posts per discussion thread varied from 10 to 228 posts; on an average, a thread contained 48 posts. The sample of 37 threads was downloaded in a separate file and coded by making use of the categories specified in Table 1.

The coding was an iterative process in which the data were scrutinized several times by the author. The pre-defined categories specified in Table 1 were used to code all the data–while still allowing new codes to emerge. However, the content of all posts submitted by the Redditors fit into the existing categories defined in Table 1 and no new categories were needed to cover the data. The 1775 posts were assigned with altogether 2031 codes. Of them, 1,354 dealt with the approach to rumour debunking, while 677 focussed on the criteria used in debunking. A post was coded only once for a criterion category once it was identified for the first time in the post. In long posts in particular, it was not unusual that the same criterion was identified in several segments of the same post. In these cases, once a message was coded for a criterion category, other instances were simply ignored. On the other hand, a post could be assigned with several criteria indicative of the approach to debunking, for example, condemning rumourmongering and expressing emotional reactions, as well as the criteria by which the rumour was debunked, for instance, provision of evidence and the perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator. To strengthen the reliability of the coding, the initial coding was refined by repeated reading of the data. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 65) noted that check-coding the same data is useful for the lone researcher and that code-recode consistencies should be at least 90%. To achieve this, several iterations were executed to ensure that the codes appropriately describe the data and that there are no anomalies.

Table 1. The coding categories

Category	Short definition and example taken from the empirical data
Approach to rumour debunking	Depicting the ways in which the pet rumour (or similar rumour) was debunked previously ("The city manager himself debunked it.", Thread 14)
Drawing on prior refutations of the rumour (or similar rumours)	Offering a personal view on why the rumour was created and distributed ("Their strategy is to repeat the lie over and over because they know their supporters will believe it and spread it.", Thread 31)
Presenting personal opinion about the rumour	Disapproving acts dealing with the spreading of the rumour ("JD Vance is wilfully spreading hateful, racist lies.", Thread 17)
Condemning rumourmongering	Calling for answerability to prevent the dissemination of false rumours ("Politicians have a responsibility to not incite racial hatred.", Thread 24)
Demanding responsibility from rumourmongers	Identifying repercussions arising from the dissemination of the false rumour ("I cannot think of what kind of bullying Haitians immigrants are having to face right now.", Thread 37)
Indicating negative consequences of rumour dissemination	Kidding about the rumour and rumourmongers ("I have it from a credible source that JD Vance eats cats and geese.", Thread 17)
Joking about the rumour and its disseminators	Expressing emotional response towards the dissemination of the rumour ("It gives them a valid reason to be racist. Disgusting.", Thread 37)
Expressing emotional reactions	The extent to which the claims constitutive of the rumour are supported by external sources of information ("I saw the police video a week ago on Reddit.", Thread 16)
Criterion used in rumour debunking	The extent to which information offers an objective (factual) description of reality ("He has been told directly by the city and the police in the city that it is false.", Thread 7)
Provision of evidence	The extent to which an argument offers a plausible and logical description of phenomena related to the rumour ("Nazis told him so, so it must be true. Weird logic.", Thread 11)
Provision of veracious information	The extent to which an information source provides an unbiased description of phenomena related to the rumour ("Republicans will believe anything as long as it ties in with a narrative they like.", Thread 22)
Argument quality	The extent to which the disseminator of the rumour is able to consider it in a sincere way ("Trump believes nothing but will lie about everything.", Thread 6)
Source impartiality	The extent to which the disseminator of the rumour is considered as capable of evaluating the content of the rumour and the consequences of its dissemination ("JD Vance is an incompetent VP pick who does not fact check or critically think about news from sources he is receiving.", Thread 17)
Perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator	
Perceived competence of the rumour disseminator	

Source(s): Created by the author

In order to examine the relative share of the categories specified in Table 1, percentage distribution was calculated for individual items indicative of the approach to rumour debunking, as well as criteria used in the debunking. To this end, the number of codes assigned to a category, for example, presenting personal opinion about the rumour (n = 204) was divided by the total number of the codes dealing with the approach to debunking, that is, 1,354. Second and more importantly, the data were scrutinized by means of qualitative content analysis. To achieve this, the constant comparative method was used to capture the variety of the Redditors' articulations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp. 339–344). More specifically, the Redditors' responses concerning the approaches to rumour debunking and criteria used in debunking were systematically compared per individual criteria. In this way, it was possible identify similarities and differences in the ways in which the Redditors, for example, presented

their personal opinions about the rumour or how the participants evaluated the provision of evidence for the existence of pet eating.

The reporting of the qualitative findings incorporates an ethical issue because they are illustrated by quotations taken from the Redditors' posts. Since the posts submitted to the r/politics subreddit are freely accessible to all readers, these posts can be seen as contributions which are intended to elicit public interest in the ways in which rumours are used in the 2024 U.S. presidential campaigns. Due to their public nature, the posts submitted to online forums may also be utilized for research purposes, provided that the identity of an individual contributor is sufficiently protected. To achieve this, the participants were identified by technical codes. For example, in R776-T18, R776 refers to a contributor who appears in the 776th place in the alphabetical list of 1,060 Redditors. Moreover, individual threads were referred to by using a technical code. For example, T-18 refers to a message that appeared in Thread 18. Second, all information about the submission dates for messages was deleted from the quotations. This procedure makes it more unlikely that an individual message and its author could be identified from the r/politics discussion threads.

6. Findings

6.1 Quantitative overview

As specified in Table 1, the Redditors made use of altogether seven individual approaches to debunk the pet rumour. The percentage distribution of the codes assigned to these approaches is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that the Redditors most frequently debunked the rumour by presenting a personal opinion about the creation and dissemination of the false claim about pet eating. Quite often, the Redditors debunked the rumour by referring to its prior refutations. Taken together, the three approaches indicative of the blameworthiness of rumour dissemination, that is, condemning rumourmongering, indicating the negative consequences of rumour dissemination, and demanding responsibility from rumourmongers comprised 28.7% of the codes assigned to the debunking approaches. The shares of debunking approaches of other kind were relatively small: the joking approach (10.8% of the codes) and expressing emotional reactions (1.8%).

Table 3 presents the distribution of the codes assigned to the criteria used in the rumour debunking.

The participants used altogether 6 diverse criteria to debunk the rumour. As Table 3 indicates, perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator was used most frequently as a criterion. In addition, perceived competence of the rumour disseminator was an important criterion. Altogether, these two person-related criteria comprised 54.1% of the codes assigned to the debunking criteria. This suggests that rumour debunking is strongly dependent on how people judge the sincerity and cognitive abilities of the rumourmongers. The rest of the criteria

Table 2. Percentage distribution of the codes assigned to the approaches to rumour debunking

Approach to rumour debunking (n = 1,354)	%
Presenting personal opinion about the rumour	43.6
Drawing on prior refutation(s) of the rumour or similar rumours	15.1
Condemning rumourmongering	14.3
Indicating the negative consequences of rumour dissemination	10.8
Joking about the rumour and its disseminators	0.8
Demanding responsibility from rumourmongers	3.6
Expressing emotional reaction	1.8
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

Table 3. Percentage distribution of the codes assigned to the criteria used in rumour debunking

Criterion used in rumour debunking (n = 667)	%
Perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator	40.5
Source impartiality	21.6
Perceived competence the rumour disseminator	13.6
Provision of evidence	11.7
Argument quality	7.5
Provision of veracious information	5.1
Total	100.0

Source(s): Created by the author

deal with the content of the rumour. Of them, the source impartiality was most frequent, followed by provision of evidence. In comparison, argument quality and provision of veracious information were employed less frequently while debunking the pet rumour.

6.2 Qualitative features of the approaches to rumour debunking

6.2.1 Drawing on prior refutations. One of the popular ways to debunk the pet rumour was simply to depict how it was refuted earlier in the media, for example. The reference to prior refutations offers an authoritative support for the assumption that the rumour is indeed baseless. To achieve this, Redditors often cited news published in legacy media, for example, CNN. Moreover, the participants depicted how the city officials had refuted the rumour.

> Vance openly admitted to CNN's Dana Bash that he purposely lied about this to draw attention to immigration. (R732-T16)

> Springfield dog warden rebukes ex-president's accusations that black people are eating dogs. (R776-T18)

The descriptive approach also manifested itself in the characterizations of similar rumours that were disseminated in other communities and found baseless.

> In the early 2000's we had an influx of immigrants from Poland in my hometown in the UK. Locals also claimed that they were eating people's pets and swans. It was also untrue. (R953-T23)

6.2.2 Presenting personal opinion about the rumour. Table 2 indicated that presenting personal opinion about the creation and distribution of false claims was the most popular approach to rumour debunking among the Redditors. Personal opinions are based on the participants' beliefs about the nature of the pet rumour, as well as motives behind its dissemination. To this end, Redditors explained why in their view the claim about pet eating is baseless and should thus be disapproved. This was done by presenting a personal opinion about why immigrants do not harm companion animals.

> The Haitians in Springfield are not even illegal immigrants! Haitians don't even eat cats and dogs! It is like the Republicans mixed up racist stereotypes and decided to roll with it. (R423-T34)

Many of the opinion-based refutations depicted Redditors' beliefs about why the rumour was created and disseminated. It was generally believed that it was done in order to boost the ongoing presidential campaign. It was suspected that Vance and Trump are well aware of the falseness of the racist rumour but still spread it to please voters holding anti-immigration views. On the other hand, the Redditors believed that the rumour is disseminated to divert attention from matters unfavourable to the party, for example, the critique addressed towards *Project 2025*. It is political initiative published by the American conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation. Project 2025 aims to promote right-wing policies to reshape the federal government of the United States and consolidate executive power, under the premise that Donald Trump would win the 2024 presidential election.

> All Trump wanted was to stop people from talking about the issues. As Pete Buttigieg pointed out, this is all planned to keep us from discussing Project 2025 and his policies/lack thereof. (R355-T9)

Interestingly, some Redditors suggested that the ultimate reason for the distribution of the pet rumour is to meet the expectations of the supporters of the Republican Party. It was believed that they expect the presidential candidates to present provocative views on immigration. Trump and Vance then fulfil their wishes by spreading hostile rumours. Certain groups such as illegal immigrants are targeted because the political campaign has to identify "enemies" threatening the traditional values of American society.

> This is just an easy way to mock and laugh at immigrants for being 'others' and 'not like us' while also accusing them of being dangerous due to being 'uncivilized.' (R1010-T37)

6.2.3 Condemning rumourmongering. The dissemination of a politically motivated rumour is also a moral issue. From this perspective, rumour debunking draws on moral appeals suggesting that the dissemination of false rumours should be considered blameworthy, reprehensible and thus subject to disapproval. The pet rumour was condemned because it was perceived as an action that unscrupulously served the pursuit of political power at the expense of offering truthful information. It was resented that someone in a high political position condescends to spread baseless rumours. Another issue giving rise to the condemnation of the rumour was that Vice-Presidential Nominee Vance continued the dissemination of the baseless claim, despite that it was proven false by the fact-checkers. Moreover, spreading a rumour without confirming its truthfulness is objectionable.

> Even when Vance has a Republican Mayor, Governor, and Police Superintendent tell him that the pet eating story is a lie, he still spews the falsehood. (R606-T15)

> At the very least they needed to look into the story to see if it had any 'legs' before using it to campaign and certainly before yelling it at a debate. (R129-T10)

6.2.4 Demanding responsibility from rumourmongers. Closely related, Redditors made use of moral appeals to debunk the rumour. To this end, they adopted a persuasive strategy that targets the audience's sense of right and wrong. More specifically, the pet rumour was debunked by demanding responsibility from rumourmongers.

> As someone running for the highest seats in the country, I believe Vance and Trump have a responsibility to not spread racist propaganda. (R853-T15)

On the other hand, presidential candidates ignoring their responsibilities towards citizens should be sanctioned. As one of the Redditors (R809-T10) put it, "He (Vance) should be taken right to court and held personally liable for the damage he has done". Fellow participants voiced similar requirements.

6.2.5 Indicating the negative consequences of rumour dissemination. One of the ways to debunk the pet rumour was to demonstrate that its dissemination had already led to serious consequences in Springfield. If people believe in the rumour and continue to spread it, there is a risk that the consequences will become even more severe during the ongoing presidential campaign. To this end, the participants identified concrete issues and risks arising from the pet rumour.

> His (Vance's) made-up story has caused, what it is at now, somewhere in the 30s for bomb threats. Schools and other places having to go virtual and now more cops needed. (R307-T29)

> Imagine minding your own business as an immigrant walking down the street and being almost killed by an angry mob because of a fucking rumor. (R186-T7)

6.2.6 Joking about the rumour and its disseminators. Even though the false claims about pet eating led to serious consequences particularly in Springfield, the debunking efforts also incorporated joking about the rumour. This approach may be an effective way to discredit false

claims because putting them in a ridiculous light can decrease their credibility among people. Most of the humorous posts focussed on the ridiculing of the main disseminator of the rumour, that is, J.D. Vance. One of the participants (R285-T17) called him "a clown", while another Redditor (R469-T13) reported that after having read about the rumour "I was laughing so hard I could not breathe". One of the popular topics giving rise to ridiculing comments was Vance's way to disregard the counterevidence offered by fact-checkers.

> It is not my fault for lying, it is your fault for not catching me, sooner. (R528-T15)

Both Vance and Trump were derided for their gullibility to rely on the hearsay of local individuals or the naïve reliance on videos about pet eating presented on television and social media forums.

> When he (Trump) said that 'I saw it on the television' I immediately blurted out, he is Archie Bunker! (R537-T6)

6.2.7 Expressing emotional reactions. Finally, the Redditors made use of emotional appeals to persuade fellow Redditors and people reading Reddit posts to believe that rumourmongering is a repulsive phenomenon and thus subject to disapproval. To this end, the Redditors expressed negative emotions such as anger, disgust and fear. Emotional reactions were directed towards Vance in particular because he was considered the main culprit behind rumourmongering. The affective approach was also used to elicit sympathy towards people subject to false claims.

> It is disgusting that he (Vance) would say that about any immigrant group. But the Haitians have been through enough. It is extra disgusting. (R432-T12)

> I have a lot of Haitians who have worked in my kitchens the last few years. Super cool guys. It makes me angry that they are being framed this way. (R313-T23)

6.3 Criteria used in debunking

Table 3 indicated that while grounding the debunking of the pet rumour, the criteria related to the personal characteristics of rumourmongers occupied a central role. In the following, criteria of this type are discussed first, followed by the criteria dealing with the content of the rumour.

6.3.1 Perceived honesty of the rumour disseminator. The debunking of the rumour was often justified by drawing attention to the insincerity of the rumourmongers, most notably Vance and Trump. Most of the negative assessments of this kind were based on claim that the presidential candidates are lying intentionally. The dishonesty was explained by referring to their political ends, that is, preferring the pursuit of power over the provision of truthful information.

> Trump will lie about anything to get elected. (R19-T15)

Dishonesty in the dissemination of the rumour was considered particularly serious because it was felt that the rumourmongers do not care about the counterevidence offered by fact-checkers. The rumour is spread even though its distributors know that it is baseless.

> It was so blatant that the moderator had to call him (Trump) out on the spot, then claimed 'but I saw it on TV'. This shows that he will use anything to get his way even when he knows it is blatantly not true. (R875-T18)

6.3.2 Perceived competence the rumour disseminator. The extent to which a person disseminating a rumour is taken seriously depends on the perceived competence of the rumour disseminator. Again, the Redditors adopted a critical view on the cognitive abilities of the presidential candidates resorting to the spreading of a politically motivated rumour.

> JD Vance is an incompetent VP pick who does not fact check or critically think about news from sources he is receiving. (R993-T17)

> He (Trump) thinks Haitians are eating dogs, he thinks kids are going to school and changing genders before coming home. Trump is dangerously stupid. (R331-T36)

The poor competence of the candidates was also assessed from the perspective of their abilities to lead the United States in the future years. Again, the judgements appeared to be highly critical, suggestive of that the dissemination of the pet rumour was a political mistake.

> Trump saying Haitians are eating people's pets was the most simple and obvious example of why Trump simply can't be president. He was manipulated so easily by an insult that a 12 year old could recognize as bait, but took in anyways. (R875-T18)

6.3.3 Source impartiality. While debunking the content of the pet rumour, the reliance on biased information sources favoured by the rumourmongers was the most popular criterion. Many of the judgements presented by the Redditors were based on the view that Vance and Trump uncritically prefer information obtained from like-minded people and ignore information sources offering contrary evidence about pet eating.

> We don't have a Dan Rather on tv every night telling everyone facts. Imagine him on prime time, saying 'Donald Trump unveils a new racist tirade tonight, falsely claiming immigrants are eating pets.' But instead, we have Fox News posting fake stories that back up Trump's wild claims. (R754-T22)

The problem of relying on biased information sources was put in a broader context by referring to many people's preference to uncritically believe in the views presented in like-minded sources. This offers a fertile ground for the proliferation of politically motivated rumours. On the other hand, belief in biased information sources is retained because the "believers" do not accept the possibility that they could be wrong.

> I have a friend who truly believes this. No matter how many articles of proof I send him. He just says they are fake. 'If it was not true, then why is Trump and JD saying it'. (R19-T22)

6.3.4 Provision of evidence. The preference for biased sources among rumourmongers suggests that they would face difficulties in trying to provide convincing evidence for the existence of pet eating among immigrants. By drawing on the criterion of insufficient evidence, the Redditors were keen to reveal gaps in the provision of factual support for claims about immigrants harming companion animals.

> They (Vance and Trump) saw a video of something. Whether it was a video in context with enough actual proof that it showed what it claimed to show, is another story. But, because they 'saw a video', they now view themselves as a firsthand account and thus beyond doubt. (R705-T24)

In more detailed assessments, it was demonstrated that the evidence on which Vance and other rumourmongers had drawn is non-specific or inaccurate. Moreover, there appeared to be factual errors dealing with the place where the suspected pet eating had occurred.

> The person in the video has already been identified. She is not Haitian or even an immigrant. She is a mentally ill person who was born in the USA.
>
> https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/haitians-eating-pets-row-who-is-allexis-telia-ferrell-ohio-woman-behind-viral-animal-cruelty-case/articleshow/113214514. cms (R794-T22)

To debunk the rumour, the Redditors also drew on the comments provided by people living in immigrant communities. The evidence offered by local eyewitnesses can be particularly effective if they have long-time experience about immigrants' cultural traditions and ways of life.

> In my area of Ohio, we have lots of Haitian families. Most if not all are pretty chill just want to be left alone to work and provide for said families. I personally don't see them hurting animals. (R797-T17)

6.3.5 Argument quality. The Redditors demonstrated that the pet rumour is not believable because the arguments employed by rumourmongers are of low quality. It was asserted that the

claims about pet eating are based on poor reasoning and that there are inherent flaws in the arguments presented by Vance and Trump. Redditors claimed that one of the factors weakening the argument quality is the ignorance of fact checking and the reliance on unverifiable information. Poor argument quality was also related to the contradictory requirements presented by the rumour disseminators.

> That is hilarious. He (Vance) is literally saying we cannot trust his words and should listen to 'the media' (a group he despises) to check if he is lying or not. (R790-T24)

Redditors also revealed flaws in the logic used in the identification of people suspected of pet eating. Similarly, generalizations developed on the basis of a single incident were considered problematic. Moreover, it was critiqued that the argument quality decreased due to that the original (false) claims were repeated uncritically.

> You saw one video of one person who allegedly killed a pet and possibly ate it. That one video and one person had no connection to Haitians in Springfield. So, your brain is being tricked by 'well, one person might have done it' into believing 'many people, from this specific community, are doing it'. That is an absurd leap of illogical nonsense. (R705-T22)

> The worst part about it is that it was a feedback loop. JD Vance said it, Trump saw it and his justification for repeating 'I saw it on TV'. (R1011-T36)

6.3.6 Provision of veracious information. Finally, if the argument quality is poor, it is evident that rumourmongers face difficulties in trying to provide factual information supporting their claims. Drawing on this criterion, the Redditors demonstrated that the lack of veracious information cannot be replaced by prejudice and vague assumptions about pet eating. Moreover, such assumptions cannot replace factual information provided by the officials.

> 100% fake. They tend to keep their insane ideas somewhat separate from each other, so it is harder for indoctrinated people to see how absurd they are when all taken together. (R706-T20)

> He (Vance) has been told directly by the city and the police in the city that it is false. (R616-T24)

7. Discussion

The present investigation offers a unique contribution to information behaviour research by examining how and by which criteria a politically motivated rumour was debunked in online discussion. The main findings are summarized in Table 4.

In a nutshell, the findings suggest that while debunking politically motivated rumours, online participants tend to draw on their personal beliefs about the nature of such rumours and the motives behind their dissemination. As the spreading of false claims for political ends is considered morally wrong, rumours are also debunked by drawing on moral appeals suggesting that rumour dissemination is a form of blameworthy action and thus subject to disapproval. Based on moral appeals, the dissemination of the false rumour is condemned, and its disseminators are requested to take responsibility for their action, particularly because rumourmongering gives rise to negative consequences in society. The rumour can also be debunked by drawing on its prior refutations, as well as making the rumour and its disseminators laughable in the eyes of the audience or presenting an emotional appeal against rumourmongering. The findings highlight the importance of person-related criteria such as the perceived honesty of rumourmongers and their perceived competence as criteria by which false rumours are debunked in online discussion. On the other hand, the rumourmongers' preference for biased information sources, the provision of the insufficient evidence and the lack of veracious information can effectively undermine the credibility of a politically motivated rumour.

The assessment of the novelty value of the findings is rendered more difficult due to the paucity of prior studies on the topic. However, a few comparative notions can be made.

Table 4. Summary of the main findings

Research issue	Approach to rumour debunking	Main findings
Approaches to rumour debunking (RQ1)	Drawing on prior refutations Presenting personal opinion about the rumour Condemning rumourmongering Demanding responsibility from rumourmongers Indicating the negative consequences of rumour dissemination Joking about the rumour and its disseminators Expressing emotional reactions	Prior refutation(s) of the rumour or similar rumours were depicted to indicate that they have already been proven baseless by authoritative sources such as local officials and news published by legacy media Drawing on one's personal views, it was explained why false political rumours are created and disseminated. It was believed that this was primarily done to boost the election campaign by persuading voters with anti-immigration views The dissemination of false rumours was disapproved because it was considered morally wrong Drawing on a moral appeal, it was required that politicians should not be guilty of spreading false claims Drawing on the serious consequences caused by rumour dissemination, it was required that false claims should be debunked In order to decrease the credibility of the rumour, it was made laughable in the eyes of the public. The rumourmongers were discredited by drawing on ridicule Negative emotions were expressed towards rumourmongers to show that the distribution of false claims is a disgusting phenomenon
Criteria used in rumour debunking (RQ2)	Perceived honesty Perceived competence Source impartiality Provision of evidence Argument quality Provision of veracious information	Rumourmongers were characterized as insincere individuals who intentionally lie to obtain political power Rumourmongers were depicted as individuals with low cognitive abilities, prone to manipulation and gullibility It was demonstrated that information sources used by the rumourmongers are biased and that they are selected to support hostile prejudice towards immigrants It was claimed that rumourmongers fail to offer sufficient evidence to support their claims. Eyewitness observations were used to refute the claims presented by rumourmongers The rumour was shown to be based on flawed argumentation and contradictory assumptions, as well as baseless generalizations drawn from a single case It was shown that the rumour is based on unverifiable, vague and false information

Source(s): Created by the author

The findings suggest that the wedge-driving political rumours such false as claims about pet eating can be effective because they are characterized by simplicity. As noted by Becket (1988, pp. 331–332), rumours of this kind use only one central idea as a core, evoke strong emotions and are easy to remember. Due to these qualities, the pet rumour spread quickly, and it was taken as a politically expedient asset in the Republican campaign. The findings also support prior observations about the negative consequences of the spreading of hostile rumours such as false claims asserting that President Obama is not a natural-born citizen (Berinsky, 2023).

The findings lend support to the conclusion that as a part of debunking efforts, the Redditors made use of the debunking approaches identified by Paek and Hove (2019), although the present investigation offered a more nuanced picture of approaches of this kind. Similar to the findings of Paek and Hove (2019), the Redditors drawing on their personal opinions about the rumour sometimes drew on *denial* while asserting that in their view the pet rumour is false. Redditors also made use of *refutation* by describing prior or similar cases where the pet rumour was rebuked as baseless. On the other hand, Redditors seldom resorted to the *attack* approach that includes responses containing threatening information or potential punishments directed at those who spread the rumours. Requirements such as these were evident only in cases in which Redditors suggested that the rumourmongers should be sued for damages caused by rumourmongering.

The findings also support the observations of Lin *et al*. (2022) suggesting that the debunking of rumours is dependent on how people judge their credibility. Support is also lent to the assumption that the extent to which a rumour is believed is dependent on argument quality, that is, the rumour receiver's perception of the strength of the information within a rumour (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the results confirm the assumption that the rumour receiver's perception of the rumour sender's competence affects the credibility of a political rumour (Yin *et al.*, 2018). The findings also support the assumptions about the significance of sufficient counterevidence for rumour debunking (Edy and Risley-Baird, 2016, pp. 596–597). Finally, in accord with the observations of Dang *et al.* (2016), it appeared that rumours can be debunked by joking about them. In the present study, however, this approach remained quite marginal. This may be due to the serious nature of the pet rumour. Finally, support was lent to the findings of Zhang *et al.* (2024). They demonstrated that affective appeals such as emotional arousal can be used to convince people that the distribution of false rumours is a repulsive phenomenon.

The findings have theoretical implications for the understanding of political rumours as a type of disinformation subject to debunking efforts. Similar to conspiracy theories, such rumours represent context-sensitive and unverified information statements that are presented in times of threat or potential danger in particular. As exemplified by the false claim about pet eating among immigrants, hostile, wedge-driving political rumours represent disinformation because they are disseminated to mislead people in order to achieve particular political goals. On the other hand, in politically polarized societies, the debunking of such rumours is rendered difficult in that there are no longer generally agreed criteria by which politically motivated false claims can be refuted. Drawing on their political values and beliefs, individuals as well opposing groups of people can reject factual counterevidence against a rumour as something "fake". Similarly, they can ignore debunking efforts which draw on one's personal opinions or moral and emotional appeals. This means that there is no objective ways and criteria by which politically motivated rumours can be debunked so that the refutation is accepted by all.

This conclusion gives to the practical implications of the study. The debunking of false rumours is politically important because liberal democracies are premised on an active citizenry informed by accurate information particularly in times of election. If citizens' voting decisions are based on false rumours, there is a danger that legitimacy of the democratic political system is undermined further. Therefore, fact-checking services, the media and online communities have no choice but continue their efforts to enhance the credibility of political information by debunking false claims distributed by rumourmongers. The refutation of political rumours is valuable because it helps citizens to view unverified information with a critical eye particularly when they seek political information from social media rather than traditional sources such as television, radio, or newspapers.

8. Conclusion

Reflecting the U.S. polarized political culture, politically motivated rumours occupied an important role in the 2024 U.S. Republican presidential campaign. The most important finding of the present study is that rumour debunking occurring in online discussion relies heavily on

the participants' personal opinions and moral judgements about the acceptability of the dissemination of false claims for political purposes. The findings explain why the creation and distribution of politically motivated false rumours are blameworthy and thus subject to disapproval. Another important finding is the central role of person-related criteria used in rumour debunking, most notably the perceived dishonesty of rumourmongers. All in all, the findings suggest that posts submitted to online discussion forums can usefully complement the debunking efforts made by professional fact-checkers and legacy media. This is because fact-checkers and the media tend to concentrate on the factual evidence for or against a rumour, while online discussions offer a broader view on the refutation of false claims by making use of various approaches to rumour debunking and a variety of criteria by which the rumour is disapproved.

As the present investigation focussed on a particular rumour disseminated during the U.S. 2024 Republican presidential campaign, there is a need to conduct comparative investigations focussing on rumours spread in other political cultures and contexts. An important topic of further research is to compare how the informational features of rumours are related to similar phenomena such as gossips, conspiracy theories and fake news. Context-specific comparative investigations are needed because it is evident that rumours, entertaining gossips and conspiracy theories will occupy a growing role in political discourse and thus potentially affect people's voting decisions.

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