Misinformation, conspiracies, and extremism

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Misinformation and extremism

- "Misinformation is a big part of our current polarization because it is **hard to bring the country together when each side has its own facts** and attributions of responsibility." – Darrell West (Brookings Institute)

- "Conspiracies can actually fulfill a **function for communities**, warning them about very powerful **political and moneyed interests that may be harming them**." – Joan Donovan (Harvard University)

- "People who believe in conspiracy theories are not less political, they are **less democratic and more dangerous**." – Lamberty and Leiser, 2019

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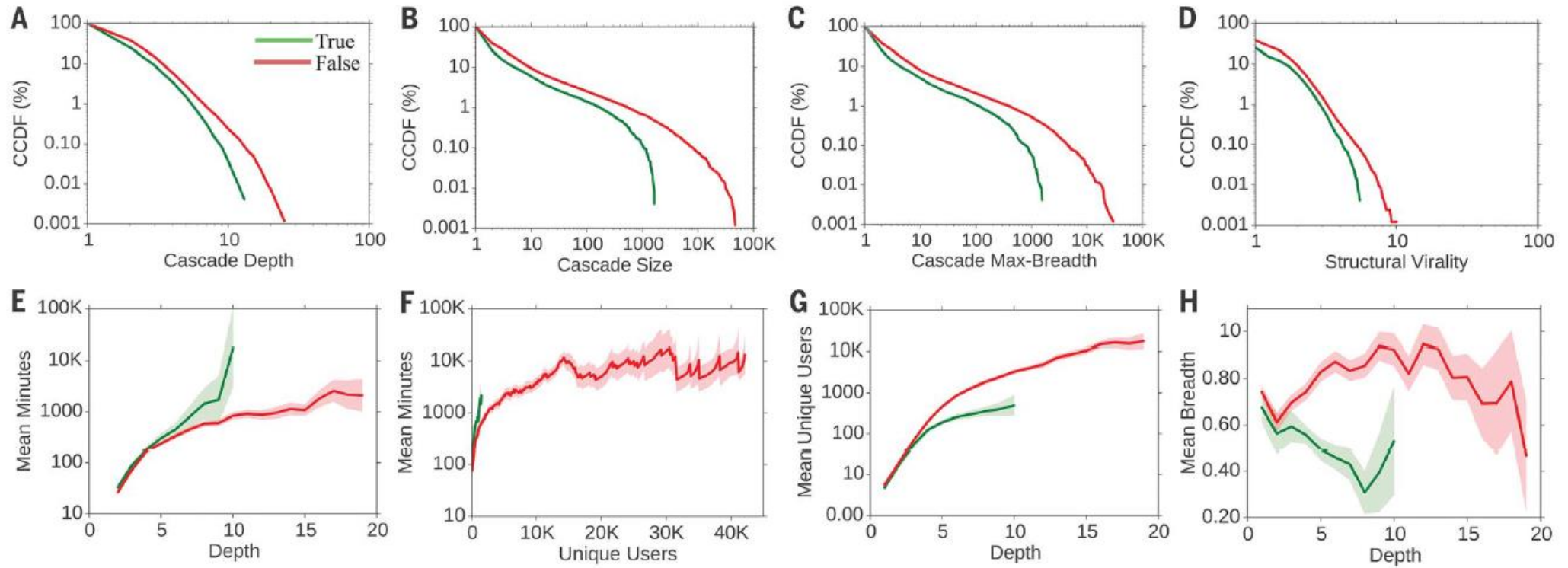
Fig. 2. Complementary cumulative distribution functions (CCDFs) of true and false rumor cascades. (A) Depth. (B) Size. (C) Maximum breadth. (D) Structural virality. (E and F) The number of minutes it takes for true and false rumor cascades to reach any (E) depth and (F) number of unique Twitter users. (G) The number of unique Twitter users reached at every depth and (H) the mean breadth of true and false rumor cascades at every depth. In (H), plot is lognormal. Standard errors were clustered at the rumor level (i.e., cascades belonging to the same rumor were clustered together; see supplementary materials for additional details).

- Source: Vosughi, Ray, & Aral (2018)

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- Problem is likely to grow as sophistication increases (e.g. 'deepfakes')

Why people believe

- **Confirmation bias**

- **Group belongingness**

- **Explaining the unexplained**

- **Mistrust of news media**

- **Emotions, especially anger**

- **Ostracism and powerlessness**

The link to extremism

- Conspiracies and disinformation campaigns play on these existing tendencies to sew discord, confusion, and anger

- Often invoke a sense of identity, target political opponents – especially when one's own party is not in power

- Can strengthen existing loyalties to ingroups, provoke intense negative views toward the opposing political party

- Concerns emerging that the resulting divides can manifest into more extreme ideologies, even political violence

The link to extremism

- Recent evidence on effects of misinformation/conspiracy belief:
  - Increased perceptions of distance between partisans on political issues

  - Lead to exaggerations regarding the extent to which others share in holding a misinformed or conspiratorial belief

  - Fosters more intense dislike of individuals from the opposing political party

  - Can even increase intentions to carry out extremist violence

Opportunities

- **Minimizing the platform**
  - Avoid legitimizing groups who perpetuate falsehoods
  - De-platforming – jury is still out

- **Prevention > correction**
  - Inoculation messaging
  - Digital citizenship and information literacy

- **The hope of responsible leadership**
  - Civic obligation over expedience/profitability
  - Many levels – politicians, platforms, and media outlets