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The various dimensions of disinformation

An introduction

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1 Framing

A discourse approach to disinformation

The term “fake news” is both a famous and controversial term in the public sphere of many countries. It became a defining feature for political and media discourse in the second half of the 2010s, and its effects are bound to be felt for a long time. Since then, “fake news” has become emblematic of a sense of crisis in contemporary political and social life. Along with related concepts such as “post-truth” and the “conspiracy theory”, it speaks to a widespread worry about the fragile nature of truth in public discourse and how a culture of dishonesty appears to be undermining the social relations which provide the stability for a well-functioning democracy.

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The term “fake news” is also a highly contested term as it has a number of distinct meanings and uses. It can refer to intentionally false news masquerading as legitimate news that can mislead readers (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) for either financial or ideological purposes. Indeed, on the one hand, fake and outrageous stories, when going viral, become clickbait and can be converted to advertising revenue (Tandoc et al., 2017). On the other hand, fake news is used to promote particular ideas either to favour some people or to discredit others (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). The term can also be used for attacking reporting that one does not like, perhaps the most famous case being former president of the United States of America Donald Trump calling “fake news” any news he did not like. Finally, the use of “fake news” also raises the issue of an increased scrutiny of the ways in which news journalism works, which has implications for how the news media presents reporting as legitimate as well as how the public perceive news media outlets as objective and reliable sources of information.

Lazer et al.’s (2018: 1094) definition of fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organisational process or intent” is probably the most well-established one in the academic literature. It should be noted that this conceptualization of fake news avoids directly connecting the concept to the ideas of truth or lies and emphasises both how this information formally imitates media content and how it has not been produced using the same procedures or with the same intentions as news produced by the media. As indicated by Miró-Llinares and Aguerri (2023) from this definition, it is clear that fake news is information that acquires the characteristic of being *fake* because the producer does not use the same procedures or have the same intentions as the media. In other words, based on this approach, the “attribution of falsification is thus not at the level of the story, but at the level of the publisher” (Grinberg et al., 2019: 1). Furthermore, the term “fake news” as it is popularly used can be as problematic as the phenomena it refers to – it is often used, for example, as a propaganda tool to dismiss critical opinions. For this reason, it is mostly avoided as an analytic term in favour of “mis-“ or “disinformation”, even if it still occurs regularly in media and everyday discourse.

The complexities arising from the popularity of the term and its positioning as an emblem of contemporary political distress, along with the wide range of social domains in which its effects can be felt, means that it is studied across many different disciplines which focus on various different themes and use a variety of methodologies. An essential element in all instances of disinformation, however, is communication of information, and thus the creation, dissemination, and contestation of discourse. And it is this point which acts as the inception point for this *Handbook*, highlighting and examining the ways in which analysis of the discursive nature of disinformation is essential to our understanding of and ability to address the issues produced by the phenomenon.

A case study approach to disinformation

After the 2016 US presidential election, the terms “fake news” and “disinformation” came to be used interchangeably as a way to discuss the veracity of information found especially on online social networking platforms and the potential threats to social order that contested information can bring (Miró-Llinares and Aguerri, 2023). This is also due to the fact that in society, the term “fake news” has become a mechanism for undermining individual journalists and the professional media as a whole, which may not be related to the quality of journalism but, rather, to brand reporting that one disagrees with as “fake news”. The term is also woefully inadequate to capture the variety of information “pollution” that stifles public discourse. Misleading content can take many forms: satire, clickbait, inaccurate captions, images or statistics, real content taken out of context, manipulated quotes and images, and made-up stories. Almost none of these details are captured by the term “fake news”. For these two reasons, the term “fake news” should be avoided. Indeed, much of the discussion about information pollution mixes two terms: *misinformation* and *disinformation*. While there are certain generic properties and patterns that can be identified in the spread and effects of mis- and disinformation, “fake news” exact character and influence are always going to be tied closely to the context in which it exists. The media ecosystem which operates in a particular regional context, for example, will have a bearing on how information is shared within a

community, while the cultural history of that community is also likely to influence how the information is interpreted. It is for these reasons – the multiplex meanings associated with the usage of the terms mis- and disinformation and “fake news”, and the importance that context plays in the character and spread of these types of communication – that the *Handbook* takes a “case study” approach, surveying in detail a range of environs, practices, and events which are centred around the spread of disinformation.

2 Explanation of key concepts

It is worth distinguishing between true news and false news, and between news that is intentionally created, produced, or disseminated. While *disinformation* is false information that is deliberately passed on with the intention to deceive or otherwise cause harm, *misinformation* can be defined as false information disseminated by someone who believes it to be true (Wardle, 2020).¹

Misinformation and disinformation have been an issue in the history of mass media for a long time. A notable example dates back to 1938, with Orson Welles’ radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* (Tandoc et al., 2017; cf. also Cantril, 2005), which took the shape of a live news report, in a period when not only “the radio offered a more immediate communicative ethos” than any other forms of communication (Enli, 2016: 18) but also in which “[b]roadcast radio represented an unprecedented means of mass communication, and it required new media literacy skills to comprehend” (Enli, 2016: 28). Nowadays, just like in the US in the 1930s, a new form of mass communication which requires literacy skills is employed to spread information: social media.

The rise of social media, based on user-generated contents and many-to-many communication, represented a step forward in the democratisation of the public sphere, as information could be made potentially available to all Internet users: through social media, online information (and dis-/misinformation) reaches mass audiences. “An important facilitator of such distribution is how social media blur the conceptualization of information source” (Tandoc et al., 2017: 139), which is rarely verified by readers. In this process, while

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citizens can turn into participative-journalists (Wall, 2015) in the interaction with other people, if their post becomes viral – and therefore popular – it receives attention and is commented on whether it is true or not, in a self-fulfilling cycle, thus becoming legitimate news (Lokot and Diakopoulos, 2016).

A consequence of these new means of circulating information and opinion has been a rise in the prominence of extremist and, in some cases, even violent discourse, which is often linked to the use of fake news as a communication strategy deliberately used for strategic ends (McNair, 2018). For example, some extreme right-wing groups in several nations employ the language of protection for national tradition and culture to justify their anti-migration policies. Their racist ideologies become more acceptable to a wider public as they are conveyed through speeches that seem respectable and civil (van Dijk, 1992). Other groups use the same type of language to “protect” their children from official science, seen as going against traditional values and nature. This “weaponization” (Farhall et al., 2019: 4354) of the term, together with that of the synonyms “post-truth” and “alternative facts”, has been appropriated by elite people around the world within the information ecosystem for strategic and persuasive purposes “to describe news organizations whose coverage they find disagreeable” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017: 5) and therefore diminish the individuals’ trust in news media. It is clear that “fake news” is inextricably tied up to a range of problematic aspects of modern discourse, including propaganda, hate speech, conspiracy theories, to list a few of them. When these claims are pronounced by people with authority, for common people it becomes difficult to discern real news from fake news and elements of hatred that can be in elite’s speech are not recognised even if they can be deemed harmful, because representatives of institutions never support their arguments with offensive language but rather with vague and ambiguous discourse (Sorial, 2013). As a consequence, these messages tend to be misinterpreted and become therefore acceptable and credible without recognising the underlying falsity or hatred.

Fake news shares a common terrain with conspiracy theories, undoubtedly one of the most popular and influential phenomena in the context of disinformation. Conspiracy theories commonly refer to a set of beliefs stigmatised as false, extravagant, totally irrational, and

often dangerous to society as well as to individuals. They are “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., 2019: 4). A conspiracy theory consists of a set of explanations on matters pertaining to politics, science, the economy, etc., for which the “official” explanations are not accepted. Such explanations are contained in the narratives proposed by the “epistemological authorities” (Uscinski, 2020), that is, those official social institutions, such as government, scientists, academia, media, which are in charge of constructing knowledge of all kinds. Conspiracy theories are said to be affected by “crippled epistemology” (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009: 211), they are “unproven stories told as truth” (Bergmann, 2018: 6) or “bad science” and a pathology that affects some people whose conduct may damage other individuals or even society as a whole (Harambam, 2020: 14–16). While conspiracy theories are not new at all, there is little doubt that the current information environment, dominated by social media and networked communities, have made conspiracy theories extremely quick to launch and spread and, in turn, they can become very popular and heavily influence the public sphere.

Fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories are seen as thriving in a social and media environment which seem to be dominated by a general distrust in “official” news as well as all the information originating from “experts” of all kinds operating as part of the epistemological authorities. Scholars have tried to make sense of this new environment by using the term “post-truth”, a paradigm whereby “emotion is claiming its primacy and truth is in retreat” (d’Ancona, 2017: 31). With post-truth, objective facts are subordinate to one’s own personal beliefs and emotions and are discarded when they do not fit into one’s own vision. This phenomenon has larger implications. As argued by McIntyre (2018), post-truth started with science denial but now engulfs many aspects of society and politics.

One of the main functions for which the creation and circulation of disinformation is used is propaganda. Propaganda can be defined as a form of political persuasion which both manipulates and deceives its target audience. Although the word “propaganda” has not always had negative connotations, as the concept developed throughout the twentieth century, and was used extensively in the First, Second, and Cold Wars, it is now seen as a problematic

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form of political communication, associated especially with totalitarian regimes or those intent on perverting the workings of democracy. The spreading of disinformation can be a powerful propagandistic tactic in that it presents a false sense of reality which can be used either to bolster the image of those in or seeking power or undermine the critics and opponents of those in or seeking power. In this sense, propaganda is one of the purposes to which disinformation can be put, and many of the tactics available to the propagandist make use of disinformation as a resource.

Another concept having a close relationship with disinformation is hate speech. This is primarily a legal concept identifying speech which expresses or advocates violence against persons based on characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Precise definitions vary according to the different laws in different countries, and there is always a balancing act between free speech protections and the types of language use proscribed by hate speech legislation. One particular form of hate speech is to present false and derogatory information about a person or people with the intent to whip up prejudice against them. It is within this context that hate speech can become a relevant concept for discussing disinformation.

Undoubtedly, the removal of fake news and hate content from online platforms and society should focus on educating citizens and promoting policies to reduce social tensions. Yet a large problem in combating fake news is the lack of datasets. With this volume we hope to fill this gap. We would like to explain the reasons why *fake news*, *post-truth*, conspiracy theories, and *alternative facts* are so widespread in society and in what contexts, what is meant by them, what persuasive strategies are employed and why, how fake news can be discerned from real news, and how the latter can gain position in society.

3 So what?

In the early days of the media panic about “fake news”, the editorial teams of news organisations liked to publish simple guides on how consumers could guard against being fooled by mendacious news stories and how a mixture of media literacy and critical thinking

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skills could be used to combat the problem. These often took the form of short lists of bullet points with advice on how to consume the news. The purpose behind these seems self-evident: “fake news” is a problem, and thus the identification of where, why, and how it happens is a first step in the process of stopping it from happening in the future. This approach was invariably highly simplistic, however, and often gave the impression that combatting the issues was something achievable by the individual were he or she just to follow these helpful guidelines.

The problem of “fake news” is, of course, far more complex than this. It can be broken down into different elements. There are the workings of the news and other information-communicating media ecosystems as these exist and operate in different locales. An understanding of the various political, economic, and practical forces which shape these ecosystems can provide insights into where reform can be targeted to attempt to align the functioning of the media environment with the ideals (e.g. liberal democracy, freedom of expression) upon which the political system of the state is built.

Secondly, there is media literacy and critical thinking competencies of the population. The generation, circulation, and application of information is a highly complex phenomenon which has immense bearing on how society operates. A simple distinction between “fake” and truthful news, or between legitimate and illegitimate information, does not exist, even if popular discourse around “fake news”, with its prediction for extreme examples, would like to suggest it does. Instead, a critical citizenry needs to have an awareness of how knowledge, in the form of information, is produced, circulated, and used so that they are able to act on this in an informed way.

Finally, there are the ways the political system itself manages the flow of information within society. The news media, for instance, is often characterised as the “fourth estate” in liberal democracies, complementing the roles played by the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. Laws protect, regulate, or constrain the ways in which information is communicated, and the complexion of these laws is one of the defining factors in the type of political system (e.g. liberal democracy, autocracy etc.).

To make the decisions needed to influence any or all of these elements, one first needs a detailed understanding of the ways in which mis- and disinformation are spread and used throughout society. Given the importance of the contextual factors which influence this spread and use, a case study approach can be particularly insightful. The scope of this *Handbook* therefore allows us to survey a broad range of such studies, as well as to examine and explicate the methodologies used for studying them.

4 Structure of the *Handbook*

As said previously, a major problem in combating fake news is the lack of datasets. This *Handbook* attempts to fill this gap by explaining the origin of the terms “fake news”, “disinformation”, “misinformation”, “post-truth”, and “alternative facts”; what is meant by them; the extent to which these terms are used in society; what persuasion strategies are used and why; how “fake news” can be distinguished from real news; and how the latter can gain prominence in society. As we will see, the chapters gathered in the *Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation* comprise foundational paradigm for discourse in the context of “fake news” that is large enough to support a variety of approaches, methods, and definitions related to the terms “fake news”, “disinformation”, and “misinformation” in their application to discourse. More specifically, the *Handbook* is divided into two main sections according to their relevance to linguists: (i) genres and methodologies, (ii) case studies, including (a) politics, (b) society, and (c) medicine. The two proposed sections provide a wide range of specific applications, showing how the concepts of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are explored in a variety of contexts and for a wide range of applications. Case studies are used to show how the discourse on “fake news” is constructed, what persuasive strategies are used, and how misinformation is created. By using “fake news” models and state-of-the-art methodological approaches, the volume will also make a significant contribution to current linguistic research on the discourse of “fake news”.

The first part, *Genres and methodologies*, focuses on some of the genres, such as headlines, memes and Twitter posts, and on different methodological approaches, such as

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multimodality, corpus analysis, AI, etc., that address how to approach the analysis of disinformation discourse and what kinds of data to use.

The first approach is offered by **Michele Sala**'s research, "The Expression of Bias in (Online) Newspaper Headlines". This research examines the genre of headlines in the US media and shows how bias can be embedded in the formulation of headlines in the US media, which thus become a possible means of codifying partial, distorted truths or falsehoods, either as forms of misinformation or disinformation. While headlines provide clues to the content and the angle from which the content is interpreted, due to the particular brevity of the genre, which requires processes of simplification of the content, they can convey forms of bias by favouring certain views over others, by foregrounding certain elements of information and giving them interpretive significance.

The second chapter by **Farah Sabbah**, "Critical Discourse Analysis Approaches to Investigating Fake News and Disinformation", shows models and frameworks developed by CDA to investigate the discursive strategies used in the production of fake news, the role of the social actor in the dissemination of false information, and the social action of labelling information as "fake news". This chapter presents CDA methods that can be used to study manipulation strategies of legitimization strategies used in the production of false information and the dissemination and labelling of false information as a social action. The study on the fictitious newsletter story "John Hopkins University confirms: You can be vaccinated with a PCR test, even without knowing" shows and demonstrates the CDA frameworks, models, and techniques that researchers can use to answer their research questions. Junior critical discourse analysts can use the models and theories presented as a guide for their own research on fake news and misinformation. More importantly, this chapter argues that critical analysis of the discourse on fake news and disinformation can add to the body of knowledge about the problems and concerns surrounding the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation in the digital age, while also producing potentially more complex frameworks and useful suggestions for dealing with them.

The quality of information and the spread of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are the focus of **Bente Kalnes**' chapter, "Introducing Digital Source

Criticism: A Method for Tackling Fake News and Disinformation”. The author updates “source criticism” by analysing its modern twist and proposing the notion of “digital source criticism”. She points out the enormous difficulties in assessing the authenticity of sources (and especially news sources) in the digital environment, even among professionals in the field (e.g. journalists), and addresses digital source criticism in its three components: sources, information, and technology. Using a case study (a tweet by former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt that included a photo previously published in a different context), the author shows how easily the public can be misled with misinformation or disinformation and how urgent it is for journalists to use a critical toolkit to detect and avoid fake news.

Paola Catenaccio’s contribution, titled “A Model for Understanding and Assessing Semi-Fake Scientific News Reporting”, addresses the problem of misinformation in science reporting by identifying theoretical constructs that can help explain the phenomenon of “semi-fake” news, which refers to the reporting of scientific research that is at least partially misleading, even if it does not contain obvious falsehoods. The chapter offers an account of the discursive operations and cognitive phenomena involved in the communicative functioning of semi-fake news, which fall into the category of misinformation: precisely because they do not accurately reflect the intention of the text on which they are based, they convey information in ways that are often not only biased but also lead to conclusions that are not justified by the evidence originally presented.

The chapter by **Fatemeh Torabi Asr**, **Mehrdad Mokhtari**, and **Maite Taboada**, “Misinformation Detection in News Text: Automatic Methods and Data Limitations”, attempts to detect whether or not a news article contains misinformation based on linguistic properties, while focusing on the difficulty of automatically detecting misinformation through natural language processing techniques. Although it is often claimed that the challenge of detecting misinformation on a large scale can be perfectly solved by machine learning and natural language processing, they claim that these approaches fail due to the lack of reliable annotated data. Their “stylometric” study identified certain trends in linguistic patterns in fake news articles. Some of these, such as n-grammes and semantic features, proved very useful in predictively classifying fake and real news articles; others, such as readability

features, were rather less useful. They also contrasted feature-based classification models with deep-learning models and showed that feature-based models are better able to generalise across topics given the limited amount of data currently available, highlighting the need for automatic classification methods. Finally, they showed that test data could not be accurately classified when using data that had been tagged based on source reputation. This is a clear incentive for future data collection with trustworthy labelling and on a wide range of topics.

Sylvia Jaworska comes to a similar conclusion in her chapter, “Fakespeak in 280 Characters: Using a Corpus-Based Approach to Study the Language of Disinformation on Twitter”, in which she demonstrates that the difference between legitimate and fake news is not so much one of content but is based on lexico-grammatical features. In her contribution, the author compares the language of serious news sites with the tweets of a disinformation site and thus fills a gap in the literature on the discourse of disinformation. By analysing a corpus of texts from the Associated Press, the British tabloid *Daily Mail*, and the tweets of the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), the notorious Russian troll factory, Jaworska, shows that serious news tends to use a formal style, while IRA uses a more colloquial and interpersonal style with a higher frequency of certain informal lexical expressions and interjections. In this sense, Jaworska offers a possible set of tools to distinguish between reliable information and fake disinformation.

A first approach to elaborating strategies to combat fake news is the contribution by **Pietro Iaia**, “Debunking Fake News through the Multimodal Composition of Internet Memes”. Based on an empirical study with students from the University of Salento, Italy, Iaia applies the inoculation theory by showing how memes can be used to educate people to resist the persuasive power of fake news and develop a critical attitude towards information. The study shows that memes can be very effective in countering fake news on COVID-19 because of their multimodal text typology and humorous content. It is the multimodal composition of memes that activates inferential processes that lead addressees to question or reject the claims of fake news on social media: Iaia’s chapter shows that antiscientific manipulation can be rejected and neutralised by creating a new epistemic foundation through engaging and often humorous multimodal messages. If the inoculation theory can be seen as an indirect way to

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inform on issues of disinformation – and thus help readers to fight against “fake news” – other methodological approaches can be applied in discourse to identify issues of disinformation also with the help of an artificial intelligence (AI). While these modalities are not exhaustive, they will deepen our understanding of current and relevant issues related to how disinformation is spread and how it can be distinguished from genuine knowledge. For example, **Stefania M. Maci and Simone Abbiati**’s chapter, “‘*It’s never about #ProLife, it’s about punishment, hate, and religious repression*’”. Polarising Discourses and Disinformation in the Abortion Debate on Twitter”, provides an interesting reflection on how disinformation can be detected by an AI. In this study, questions about polarising discourse and disinformation in the abortion debate on Twitter are considered with the aim of automatically detecting the polarisation of attitudes based on discourse labels. When they attempted to instruct an AI to detect disinformation related to the abortion debate on Twitter over a period, from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022, they found that despite using a machine, the instruction could never be objective due to the researchers’ ideological bias. Nevertheless, they found expressions of hate speech in relation to vilification: their preliminary results show that the more polarised the discourse, the more the group is misrepresented.

A different approach is taken by **Nele Pöldvere, Elizaveta Kibisova, and Silje Susanne Alvestad** in their chapter, “Investigating the Language of Fake News Across Cultures”, where they focus on the methodological issues, possibilities, and challenges of investigating the language of fake news across cultures. The authors refer to the Fakespeak project, a collaboration between linguists and computer scientists whose aim is first to identify the terminology and writing patterns used in fake news in English, Norwegian, and Russian and then to see if the results can be used to improve current fake news detection systems. When collecting data in the three languages representing the three different cultures (e.g. English in the US), there were a number of methodological problems that required creative solutions. The difficulties were somewhat different in each situation, with Norwegian and Russian users having particularly little access to “quality data” (compilations of real and fake news, each separately checked for validity by specialists) for a variety of reasons. The datasets produced so far by the Fakespeak project are extremely diverse. They

range from large datasets with news published by numerous authors (so-called multiauthor datasets) to smaller datasets in which both fake and real news were written by one and the same author (single-author datasets). A number of data types are crucial for linguistic analyses of fake news that allow meaningful comparisons with real news, as well as for the subsequent development of automatic detection systems.

In the second part of the *Handbook*, case studies are presented that deal predominantly with issues or specific contexts related to the global and multicultural dimensions of disinformation: (a) politics, (b) society, and (c) medicine.

The “Politics” section begins with the chapter “Disinformation and Immigration Discourses” by **Charlotte Taylor** and focuses on the function of misinformation in discourses of immigration, which seems to be necessary to maintain the far right’s constantly pessimistic view of mobility. Misinformation is examined here by considering the emergence of terms that do not make sense (such as “bogus asylum seekers”) and the avoidance of terms that are true and legitimate (such as “refugees”) in public discourses about immigration. Furthermore, the study looks at the myths that are closely related to current immigration discourses. These include both the myths that have been repeatedly debunked by social data and those that can be debunked by linguistic and historical studies (such as the fallacy that the UK has always been a welcoming nation). In both cases, the research shows how the maintenance of misinformation depends on the presence of contextual or salient information.

Apart from immigration, one of the main aspects of the disinformation revolves around the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. This topic is explored in the chapter “BREXIT and Disinformation” by **Tamsin Parnell**. This chapter examines the spread of problematic information related to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union (commonly referred to as Brexit). Specifically, it looks at three claims made during the EU referendum campaigns: that the UK transferred £350 million a week to the EU when it was a member, that Turkey would soon join the EU, and that the UK would be overrun by migrants due to the EU’s migration policy (through the infamous “Breaking Point” poster). It also examines the phenomenon of Euromyths and their characterisation as

disinformation. A case study is used to show that the Eurosceptic pro-Brexit press repeatedly spread disinformation about the EU at the time of the referendum.

The way politicians use strategies to delegitimise opponents is discussed by **Alan Partington** and **Alison Duguid** in their chapter, “New Dogs, Old Tricks. A Corpus-Assisted Study of the ‘Art’ of Delegitimation in Modern Spoken Political Discourse”, where instances of attempted delegitimation of an opponent are analysed in a number of corpora of interactive spoken discourse. As the authors have noted, aggressive face attacks and attempts to delegitimise a questioner and/or their questions are common in briefing discourse (Marakhovskaiia and Partington, 2019; Partington and Duguid, 2021) in order to divert attention from the information sought to the status of the information source. In this study, it is shown that delegitimation is often accompanied by accusations of disinformation, fake news, or lying when a request triggers an assertion of unsubstantiated information, but also that it is often a response to a question on a topic that is the locus of disinformation.

A detailed overview of the nature of information warfare today and the role disinformation plays in it is offered by **Michelangelo Conoscenti** in his chapter, “The Military’s Approach to the Information Environment”. Since the public space in Europe is the target of military information and influence activities, the military and political contexts must be taken into account in order to better prepare public opinion for their influence. This would mean prioritising contrasting actions against information operations by foreign states that aim to politically influence public opinion in Europe. Despite the efforts of NATO to suggest specific solutions, its politico-military nature does not allow it to proactively lead change and transformation: NATO merely reacts by trying to adapt and accommodate scenarios within a traditional working model. The result is fragmented and incoherent communication, which is also shared and reflected by the European Union.

In their chapter “Attitudes About Propaganda and Disinformation: Identifying Discursive Personae in YouTube Comment Sections”, **Michelle Zappavigna** and **Olivia Inwood** focus on analysing social media users’ attitudes in response to propaganda and disinformation. In their chapter, they use Martin and White’s evaluation framework and Zappavigna’s own concept of ambient affiliation to track users’ comments on videos

published by the YouTube channel Russia Today (RT) about the poisoning of Russian dissident Sergei Skripal. RT is known for spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, and the analysis of user comments offers original insights into the nature of polarised discourse, with users employing very different linguistic devices to either praise or criticise RT's videos. The authors identify a number of discursive personae, that is, the generic identities that are grouped and represented in discourse (e.g. the nationalist persona or the conspiracy theory persona), and discuss the ways in which their evaluative and affiliative strategies are enacted in language.

The relationship between citizens' perspectives on the news media and their beliefs about politics, democracy, and their own political engagement is the focus of the chapter "Citizens' Perspectives on the News Media and Democracy: A Citizens' Panel Case Study from Wales" by **Philip Seargeant, Donna Smith, and Dylan Moore**. It offers an interesting perspective applied to the context of Welsh politics and the various challenges that arise in this context, both from a political, cultural, and media perspective and because of the nature of the union between Wales and the broader concept of the United Kingdom. The chapter reports on the process and findings of a citizens' panel research project conducted by the Open University and the Institute of Welsh Affairs in the first half of 2022. This research project explored how Welsh citizens' access to and understanding of media, news, and information in Wales could be improved, particularly in an era of "fake news". The chapter not only provides an insight into how Welsh citizens view the news media and democracy in the age of "fake news", but also outlines the challenges and opportunities associated with conducting a citizens' panel on a topic of this nature, which academics and policymakers can hopefully learn from.

The problem of disinformation affects all societal contexts. Indeed, a more in-depth focus on society is addressed in "Society", the second sub-section of the case studies. The contribution by **Sergio Maruenda-Bataller**, "(Dis)information and Ethical Guidelines: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reporting on Violence against Women", draws attention to gender-based violence and discusses the ways in which the media are (un)informed about violence against women. As a criminal phenomenon with profound social implications,

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violence against women has attracted much attention, and the media in many countries have developed certain guidelines for reporting on this type of violence in order to ensure greater visibility and sensitivity to the issue among the public. However, as the author argues, this kind of attention has often led to the spread of stereotypes about gender-based violence: the media still tends to portray violence against women as something women should be blamed for because they do not follow certain social rules. Lack of knowledge in the editorial offices and routine in news production are to blame for this phenomenon.

Aspects related to the strategies and effects of disinformation directed against women in politics, focusing on “image manipulation” and “false identity attribution”, are covered in **Eleonora Esposito**’s chapter, “Online Gendered and Sexualised Disinformation Against Women in Politics”. The chapter explores misinformation, gender, and violence at the intersection of politics and digital media, with a particular focus on gendered digital disinformation, that is, the digital dissemination of false or misleading information that attacks women on the basis of their identity as women. This type of disinformation uses visuality as the main feature of digital communication and is characterised by a high prevalence of sexualising and objectifying graphic content. Critically, it is explained as being rooted in traditional gender hierarchies and media sexism, which contributes to undermining the credibility and social acceptance of women in decision-making positions and discouraging them from participating in public debates.

Giuseppe Balirano and **Hughes Brownen** explore issues of disinformation in anti-LGBTIQ+ online discourses and the resulting claim that sexual diversity goes against the majority of traditional, ancestral, and religious values. Their chapter, “The Rainbow Conspiracy: A Corpus-Based Social Media Analysis of Anti-LGBTIQ+ Rhetoric in Digital Landscapes”, shows how these narratives support the theory that a secret, large-scale gay lobby, like the proverbial Trojan horse, is slowly undermining traditional family values in order to contaminate all of humanity. This theory underlies an alleged disinformation campaign reportedly being carried out on most social media platforms. The author’s corpus-based discourse-critical approach to the online fake news used and the online conspiracy texts

1 The various dimensions of disinformation

collected on Twitter show that these harmful anti-LGBTIQ+ discourses can lead to the construction of an LGBTIQ+ conspiracy theory that harms a long-suffering minority.

The issue of conspiracy theories is also central to **Isabelle Clorke**'s research on climate change denial. In her chapter, "The Discourses of Climate Change Denialism Across Conspiracy and Pseudoscience Websites", Clarke examines the discourses of climate change denialism in a corpus of texts dealing with climate change and global warming on 186 websites and blogs known to promote pseudoscience and conspiracies. The research found that blogs and websites supporting pseudoscience and conspiracy theories all adopted strategies and arguments known to have been developed and disseminated by conservative think tanks (funded by the fossil fuel industry). The data also show that while overt climate change denial is widespread on these websites, the texts tend to downplay the severity of the problem. In contrast to overt denial, which is increasingly difficult to accept given the growing body of scientific data demonstrating anthropogenic climate change, downplaying the extent of climate change is considered a more subtle and persuasive tactic.

A different societal level in the analysis of disinformation is offered by **Chiara Degano** in her chapter, "Reframing of Fake in Art Discourse", which shows that unlike in the field of news or politics, where what is "fake" hardly receives positive press, art shows a different way. This chapter explores how discourse contributes to a problematisation of the notion of forgery in art. Using different genres of digital discourse, a repertoire of frames has been identified, each with its own specific pragmatic organisation and pointing to different attitudes, ideologies, and epistemological claims. One frame represents the orthodoxy according to which forgery is bad. The associated discursive scripts are those of crime reports, with crime as the consequence. Another marks an even greater shift, where forgery is overtly pursued as a critique of the logic of the art system. In this case, the discursive practices that expose the forgery become part of the artistic project that encompasses the channel through which these copies are offered for sale and the paratexts presented there. The attention drawn to the pragmatic conventions of discourse organisation in this field can reveal the underlying epistemologies. More broadly, the chapter contributes to exploring the

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discourses of the “culture industry”, an area of subject discourse that, like most disciplines in the humanities, has received little attention in discourse and genre analysis.

The final, but not least important, subsection of Part 2, “Medicine”, focuses mainly on the impact of COVID-19 on disinfodemic practices on our society.

Roxanne H. Padley’s opening chapter, “Exploring Health-Related Misinformation, Disinformation and Fake News”, provides some information and terminological issues around the topics of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation as they relate to health-related issues. While highlighting the rise of misinformation on a variety of topics, such as vaccinations, cancer, heart disease, other infectious diseases such as Zika and Ebola, the use of stem cells, abortion, and more recently the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, Padley’s contribution outlines some of the key issues surrounding misinformation both in a broader sense and in terms of its impact on people’s health. In terms of future strategies to mitigate the problem, it is argued that the most effective strategy is to improve the digital health literacy of users in general to give them the tools they need to recognise misinformation.

The second contribution, by **Marina Bondi** and **Leonardo Sanna**, “The COVID-19 Infodemic on Twitter: Dialogic Contraction within the Echo Chambers”, explores how the views of others are systematically rejected and instrumentalised to support one’s own beliefs, particularly in Twitter discourse. Their study provides an analysis of language expressing the author’s position based on the concept of engagement (**Martin and White, 2005**), which indicates the speaker’s level of commitment to what is being expressed and expresses the speaker’s stance in terms of opening and closing the dialogic space to external views. Using a corpus of tweets and a corpus of journalistic texts on the pandemic, the study shows that not only do certain markers dominate Twitter discourse (the adversative “but”, the negative “no”/“not”, and cognitive verbs such as “know” and “think”), but that it is also possible to identify patterns that are clear signals of explicit rejections, whether advocating or rejecting a position, and that the verbs are used as markers of ideological positioning.

The lockdown triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic has shown the important role digital media have taken in our lives. However, as **Dennis Chau** and **Carmen Lee** argue in their paper titled “COVID-19 Parody Fake Voice Messages on WhatsApp”, despite the

many benefits offered by modern media, there is considerable evidence that these media have also helped to spread false and even malicious information about the disease. Their chapter explores how WhatsApp users in Hong Kong use parodied fake voice messages, an emerging audio-based digital genre that has not been thoroughly researched, to creatively counter misinformation.

A focus on the pedagogical implications related to COVID-19 and the spread of fake news is the main topic of **Maria Grazia Guido**'s chapter, "The Impact of COVID-19 Reports on Multicultural Young People's Social and Psychological Well-Being: Novel Experiential Metaphors in an ELF-Mediated Debate on Fake News". The author offers a case study of a group of university students from different countries who use ELF to discuss issues of social regulation during the pandemic. Their conversation is triggered by a shared reading of a popular science article speculating on the origins of the virus. The first draft does not particularly foreground the issue of disinformation.

The paper by **Elena Musi, Kay L. O'Halloran, Elinor Carmi, Michael Humann, Minhao Jin, Simeon Yates, and Gautam Pal** titled "Mapping Polylogical Discourse to Understand (Dis)Information Negotiation: The Case of the UK Events Research Programme" methodologically analyses polylogues where citizens, journalists, and politicians disseminate news claims while tracking potential sources of disinformation in digital media. This methodology is applied to the analysis of the discourse around the Events Research Programme (ERP) in the UK, followed by the examination of data resulting from a questionnaire that participants in the live events were asked to complete, with the aim of developing a methodology to identify how discourse can be shaped as a process to prevent the rise and spread of disinformation.

4 Conclusion

This *Handbook* provides an introduction to the concept of "fake news" from the perspective of applied linguistics and maps this concept from the angle of different disciplines (sociology, media, politics, science) in order to narrow it down linguistically and thus provide valid

theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches with which to understand the mechanism triggering (dis-/ mis-) information, post-truth, alternative facts, hate speech, and their rhetorical and persuasive strategies, in order to define an automatic model for detecting “fake news”, and as scholars, to find a way to propose guidelines for more effective communication that can help laypeople distinguish false information from real information.

The volume is therefore a valuable resource for researchers and graduate, postgraduate, and undergraduate students as an introduction to the analysis of the discourse on “fake news” and disinformation in all applied linguistics courses.

Note

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1 [Wardle \(2020\)](#): 71) claims that there exists a "third category, *malinformation*, which is information based in reality that is shared to do harm to a person, organization, or country. This term can refer to instances where private information is made public (e.g., revenge porn) or genuine imagery is reshared in the wrong context".