



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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# Online Disinformation Workshop

Cogito-Unibo – Knowledge & Cognition

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## Book of abstracts

Selene Arfini (Pavia)

### **Which actions does ignorance afford online? Understanding misinformation as an action-based relation**

In this paper, I propose a new approach to discuss the distribution of fake news on online platforms, which is not based on their different qualities with respect to true, accurate, or harmless information but on their shared cognitive traits. Indeed, both ‘true’ and ‘fake’ news can be described from an ecological perspective as action-suggesting objects in designed informative environments: in other words, they both present different *affordances* to users. Reflecting on which kind of affordances emerge through consuming and distributing any informational content online means asking some pressing questions: once we consume informative content online, what are our immediate options? If we read up about certain news we didn’t know before, does the contextual background where we find the information let us acknowledge our ignorance? Does the social framework of online media help or impede reflection on how much we do not know about an issue? In this paper, I argue that critically discussing these questions would bring us to deviate from the ongoing and, in a way, repeating debate regarding how we should distinguish between fake and actual news and let us focus on a more general but practical matter: what kinds of action does ignorance afford online?

Lisa Bortolotti (Birmingham)

### **Conspiracy theories and delusions**

Conspiracy theories are often likened to clinical delusions. In this paper, we explore some of the similarities and differences between conspiracy theories and persecutory delusions. We compare them in relation to surface features, aetiology, and downstream effects. In relation to surface features and aetiology, we argue that there is some overlap between conspiracy theories and persecutory delusions. In relation to downstream effects, we argue that persecutory delusions are characterised by severe disruption to one's life, whereas conspiracy theories are in general not psychologically harmful to those who accept them. We conclude by commenting on the consequences of comparing conspiracy theories to delusions. Delusions are symptoms of mental disorders and there is a specific kind of stigma often directed at those who suffer from mental disorder. The political use of the comparison between delusions and conspiracy theories – when it is aimed at producing or reinforcing stigmatization and exclusion – is problematic and should be avoided.

Michel Croce (Barcelona) and Tommaso Piazza (Pavia)

### **In defense of a non-doxastic view of fake news proliferation**

The ongoing discussion about the proliferation of fake news in online environments almost unanimously describes the outcome to which it typically gives rise and the mechanisms through which it is typically transmitted in terms of belief. On this *belief view*, fake news producers aim at ensuring that consumers *believe* the pieces of misinformation they are exposed to, and the fact that they form such beliefs plays a key role in explaining why they share or repost these contents on social media. The same view underwrites a specific conception of the threat posed by fake news, and of the psychological mechanisms leading to it. As regards the threat, fake news proliferation lowers the epistemic wellbeing of entire communities by spreading false and unjustified beliefs and impeding the circulation of knowledge. As regards the psychology of fake news consumption, the belief view appeals to cognitive biases and limitations of various sort. In this paper, we aim at showing that the account of fake news proliferation offered by the belief view is too narrow. In particular, we purport to do so by contrasting the belief view with a different *non-doxastic* view and showing that the latter better accommodates several paradigmatic cases of fake news proliferation. According to the non-doxastic view, the wide spectrum of behaviors underwriting the proliferation of fake news is compatible with a different explanation not involving belief, but a different propositional attitude akin to acceptance. In a nutshell, we argue that online consumers of fake news simply treat the pieces of fake news they encounter as settled for different non-epistemic purposes, such as strengthening their social and political identities. The non-doxastic view appeals to these non-epistemic interests to explain the transmission of fake news on social media. Furthermore, the view accounts

for the psychology of fake news consumers in terms of political cheerleading and for the threat posed by fake news in terms of a widespread indifference towards the truth.

Filippo Ferrari (Padua) and Sebastiano Moruzzi (Bologna)

### **Post-enquiry and disagreement**

The main aim of this talk is to investigate whether and to what extent scientists (e.g. enquirers such as epidemiologists or virologists) can have rational disagreement with post-enquirers (e.g. conspiratorial anti-vaxxers) on topics such as the safety and efficacy of vaccines. We will employ the epistemological framework we have elaborated elsewhere (Ferrari & Moruzzi 2021 'Enquiry and Normative Deviance. The Role of Fake News in Science Denialism', in *The Epistemology of Fake News*, OUP) to study the underlying normative profile of enquiry and post-enquiry in order to investigate the normative significance of disagreement between scientists and post-enquirers.

Joshua Habgood-Coote (Bristol)

### **Google search, white ignorance, and the social epistemology of algorithms**

Misinformation is often packaged as an individualistic problem. For example, concerns about fake news frame worries about users of social media sites being duped by sites that counterfeit the epistemic credentials of established media sources. In this paper I want to think about the role of algorithmic systems – and the socio-technical systems they form – in spreading false claims. Taking Safiya Noble's work on Google Search as a case study, I unpack the idea that technological systems can construct and solidify structures of ignorance production, in particular white ignorance. This idea points towards two bigger lessons: that the epistemology of algorithmic systems needs to be a social epistemology (in the sense that it evaluates socio-technical systems), and that the ethics of algorithmic systems needs to pay attention to the ethical harms of ignorance production.

Michael Lynch (Uconn)

### **Social media, news-sharing and bald-faced lies**

In this talk, I will examine two kinds of political communication we find online and argue that we commonly misunderstand their true function, which results in making us more vulnerable to toxic information pollution.

Eliot Michaelson (KCL), Jessica Pepp (Uppsala), and Rachel Sterken (Hong Kong)

### **Journalistic relevance and relevance-based knowledge resistance**

Eni Mustafaraj (Wellesley)

### **The five S-s of the digital communication evolution and their relationship to our information disorder**

Researchers have given a name to what we are collectively suffering right now: information disorder. Disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories, deepfakes, its symptoms are many. We know that the Internet and social media have something fundamental to do with this disorder and its spread, but our understanding is incomplete. In my talk, I will trace the evolution of our communication and media technologies from the telephone, radio and TV, to the internet-connected computers and the apps that run on them, using as a framework five characteristics (or the five S-s): speed, scale, storage, search, and the social aspect. Separately and together they have shaped the technological infrastructure of our communications where the information disorder is spreading wildly. But they also contain many opportunities for interventions, some of which I hope we'll brainstorm together.

Giulia Napolitano (UC Irvine)

### **The collective dimension of conspiracy theories**

In the recent debate, conspiracy theories have been primarily understood as an individual phenomenon. Scholars have focused on what makes a theory a *conspiracy theory*, and what epistemological, psychological, and political features explain why individuals come to believe them. In this paper, I argue that conspiracy theories should be understood primarily as a group phenomenon. In particular I claim that, while there is a relevant phenomenon of individual belief in conspiracies, conspiracy theories are also a kind of *group belief in the existence of a conspiracy*. I adopt a Gilbertian joint commitment framework to highlight some aspects, often overlooked, of conspiracy theories group dynamics, which help explain the persistence and resilience of conspiracy theories.

Hedvig Ördén (Lund)

### **Securing judgement: rethinking security and online information threats**

The contemporary debate in democracies routinely describes online information threats such as misinformation, disinformation and deception as security-issues in need of urgent attention. Despite this pervasive discourse, policymakers often appear incapable of articulating what security means in this context. Turning to EU policy and previous research on cybersecurity, I empirically unpack, critically interrogate, and theoretically rethink the meaning of security in relation to online information threats. In so doing, I elucidate a new

'referent object' implicitly guiding securitization. Contemporary interventions can be seen as grounded in assumptions about the protection of human judgement. Using Hannah Arendt's writings on 'political judgement' as a point of reference for critically evaluating contemporary policy, I point to several problems with existing approaches to security in a democratic context where free debate constitutes a legitimizing element of political authority. The rethinking of security departs from this problematic and shows that treating human judgement as a 'referent object' – if firmly grounded in the interplay between independent human communicating subjects – can better address some problematic questions about legitimate authority and political community currently haunting security interventions in cyberspace.

Alessandra Tanesini (Cardiff)

### **Arrogance and anger on social networking sites**

Anger dominates debates in the public sphere. Discussions especially on social media quickly and frequently become shouting matches whose participants are not afraid to express their contempt for each other. In this talk I first offer an account of why SNS are especially suited to the expression and the spread of strong emotions like anger. Second, I distinguish two types of anger that I label respectively arrogant and resistant, and detail some of their discursive manifestations. I conclude the talk by demonstrating that calls for civility, especially on-line, always risk perpetrating injustices.

Fabiana Zollo (Ca' Foscari)

### **Investigating social dynamics with online data**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the challenge of conveying and communicating complexity and uncertainty to the public, also given the increasing central role of the Internet and social media. Designed to maximise users' presence on the platform and to deliver targeted advertising, social media transformed the information landscape and have rapidly become the main information sources for many of their users. Information spreads faster and farther online, in a flow-through system where users have immediate access to unlimited content. This may facilitate the proliferation of mis- and dis-information, generating chaos, and limiting access to correct information. In this talk, I will provide an overview of how social dynamics and behavioural patterns can be investigated and analysed with online data, and discuss how data-driven insights can be used to design effective strategies to counter misinformation and improve the overall quality of the information system.