

UNTANGLING THE KNOTS BETWEEN DISINFORMATION AND INEQUALITIES: AN INTRODUCTION

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Media and communication research has an ongoing interest in how different kinds of inequalities shape, and are shaped by, the production, the circulation, the reception and the effects of news and other kinds of information (*e.g.*, Le Cam *et al.*, 2023; Skarsbø Lindtner *et al.*, 2024). This special issue of *Recherches en communication* aims to develop such lines of enquiry within the field of *disinformation* research. Inequalities are only partially or marginally addressed in academic research and public discourse on disinformation (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Nieminen, 2024). In this special issue, we examine how disinformation shapes inequalities and vice versa.

In both academic and non-academic literatures, disinformation is often defined as deliberate and organised misinformation, usually with the aim of harming an individual, a group, an organisation or a country. Misinformation, in turn, can be broadly defined as false or misleading

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information (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024). Disinformation can be used for political, military, commercial or other purposes, and can be found in propaganda and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

We understand (social) inequality as the situation in which certain social groups have fewer opportunities, resources and/or outcomes than others because of their gender, education, income, race, ethnicity, religion, living place, or any other structural or identity-based positions (see, *e.g.*, Fitz Gibbon, Nurse & Hurst, 2022). For this special issue, we put forward—without claiming for exhaustiveness—three ways in which the intersection between disinformation and inequalities can be problematised: disinformation as a source of inequalities, disinformation as an outcome of inequalities, and inequalities in the mitigation of disinformation.

The distinction between disinformation as a source or an outcome of inequalities may seem simplistic, as one can argue that the relationship between the two terms is not causal but circular. However, this distinction reflects two conflicting perspectives in disinformation research: one which—in line with the “effect study” tradition in media and communication research—focuses on the impacts of disinformation on individuals, groups and societies (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024), and another one which shifts the focus from disinformation towards societal disorders (*e.g.*, democratic failures, increasing social and economic inequalities, capitalist business models) that make disinformation possible, profitable and effective (Altay *et al.*, 2023; Altay, 2026). Each perspective tends to promote a particular definition of the problem as well as certain preferred solutions. Finally, inequalities in the mitigation of disinformation address how inequalities are present, not in the production, but in the response to disinformation.

1. Disinformation as a Source of Inequalities

Disinformation operates as a source of inequalities when it targets social or cultural groups that are disadvantaged, marginalised, discriminated against and/or stigmatised (*e.g.*, women, sexual or gender minorities, racial, ethnic or religious minorities), thereby reflecting, maintaining or reinforcing inequalities (Higdon & Butler, 2023). This type of disinformation contributes to perpetuating harmful stereotypes, shaping collective perceptions and public policies to the detriment of those groups. Research addressing disinformation along this line may focus

on a particular prejudiced group or develop an intersectional approach to the issue (*e.g.*, Reddi, Kuo & Kreiss, 2023; Agajanian & Moran, 2025).

Three articles in this special issue address disinformation along this line of research.

First, Alexandra **Colombier Vanijaka** introduces the concept of a spiral of informational opacity to capture how competing narratives, selective visibility, and asymmetrical power relations erode the conditions of knowledge in multi-actor information environments. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of official statements, media coverage, NGO reports, and visual materials, Colombier Vanijaka conceptualises

opacity as a self-reinforcing dynamic where competing narratives, performative transparency and unequal epistemic authority gradually weaken the conditions needed to interpret events. Unlike “disinformation” or “propaganda”, which imply identifiable perpetrators and clear intentions, opacity foregrounds how uncertainty is relationally produced through the interaction of multiple, asymmetrically empowered actors. (p. 18)

Colombier Vanijaka argues that information opacity reinforces inequality, functioning “not as an absence of information, but as its weaponization: a condition in which competing narratives, selective disclosure, and asymmetrical epistemic authority progressively erode the foundations needed to establish what happened, to whom, and under what circumstances” (p. 38)

Second, Igor **Kanižaj**, Leali **Osmančević** and Matea **Vidulić** examine how Croatian online news represents migrant workers. Based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of three major Croatian news portals, the study shows that readers are not primarily subjected to overt disinformation about migrant workers. Rather, inequalities are reproduced through more routine forms of misrepresentation based on framing, sensationalism, and the persistent absence of migrants’ own voices. Kanižaj *et al.* argue that migrant workers in Croatia are most often framed as economic resources, victims, or potential threats, while dignity-centred representations remain relatively rare. Their personal lives, family situations, cultural identities and broader societal participation are largely marginalised. This is particularly visible in the fact that migrants are quoted in only a small minority of articles and are

visually represented mainly in work-related contexts. This article thus identifies ways through which news coverage can have misinformation-like effects, as these representational practices, “though not always factually false, nonetheless create misleading impressions that obscure structural inequalities, marginalise migrants’ voices, and normalise their depersonalisation” (p. 68).

The third article in this special issue that approaches disinformation as a source of inequality is the one from Jaigris **Hodson** on anti-trans disinformation in the Joe Rogan Experience (JRE) podcast. Using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis, Hodson unpacks the discourse topics through which the JRE podcast exacerbates prejudice against trans people, thus reinforcing existing gender-based power structures. Disinformation against trans people relies on dehumanising discourses that naturalise gender identities while simultaneously portraying trans identities as threats to social order or public morality. The discourse topics through which the JRE podcast engages in anti-trans disinformation include, for instance, “fairness in sport”, gender stereotypes, and trans rights as part of a “woke agenda”. Hodson argues that the capitalist logic at work in the media and communication environment encourages disinformation against trans people. In this model, it does not matter that the information may be false, misleading and/or harmful for disadvantaged groups, as long as it fosters engagement through emotional content, for instance by amplifying fear and outrage among majority audiences. Ultimately, writes Hodson, “the precise nature of Rogan’s framing of trans bodies works to maintain the existing inequalities between cis and trans people and also serve to maintain Joe Rogan’s own position at the top of the media hierarchy” (p. 98).

These three articles do not exhaust the different ways of approaching disinformation as a source of inequality. Other avenues of research can be explored further. For instance, disinformation campaigns may aim to delegitimise and silence social justice movements that work to reduce inequalities and/or mitigate their effects.

2. Disinformation as an Outcome of Inequalities

From another approach, disinformation may be seen as an outcome or a symptom of growing inequalities within societies. This approach stresses that inequalities give rise to feelings of injustice, abandon, distrust and exclusion among disadvantaged groups—all of these feeding the spread of disinformation. Such a dynamic becomes glaringly

apparent in major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and climate change (Nieminen, 2024).

Especially relevant here is disinformation being strategically used to exploit social, economic and cultural inequalities to fuel tensions and divisions, as in certain types of “populist” political discourse that purposely widen the gap between “the elites” and “the people” (Hameleers, 2020). Russian disinformation is another example of such a strategy: it instrumentalises racial inequalities in the United States to inflame national divisions (Foster Bhusari, 2022) and spreads an anti-colonial narrative to serve Russian foreign policy in the countries of the “Global South” (Audinet, 2024).

This raises a series of important issues and questions about the entanglements between disinformation and inequalities. We wish to use this special issue to call upon the disinformation research community to further explore the multiple paths that this approach can take.

A large body of academic literature examines the psychological factors underlying vulnerability to disinformation, such as cognitive skills, political identities and trust in institutions (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024). In general, the role of inequalities in disinformation vulnerability is not fully explored in this type of research. One line of enquiry may therefore investigate further how inequalities among (general or specific) audiences influence the vulnerability to disinformation. Such studies may expand approaches and notions that address the relationship between information and inequalities, such as information precarity (Wall *et al.*, 2017), information poverty (Haider & Bawden, 2007), information marginalisation (Gibson & Martin III, 2019), communication inequality (Häfliger *et al.*, 2023) or—beyond information as such—the digital divide (Van Dijk, 2020).

Approaching inequalities in terms of vulnerability only gives a partial picture of disinformation as an outcome of inequalities. Another perspective positions itself at the interplay between structure and agency and looks at the strategies used by disadvantaged groups to detect disinformation and minimise its spread (Pei & Fu, 2022). Yet another line of enquiry sees disinformation as a means of protection, expression and/or protest in societies torn by multiple inequalities. This can be exemplified by “conspiracy theories”. Research points out that conspiracy theories are not necessarily bad or dangerous, and can even have positive consequences for democratic societies as they question the ways in which power is distributed and exercised in society (Uscinski, 2018).

In this special issue, one article primarily approaches disinformation as an outcome of inequalities. Christopher **Hesselbein** seeks to disentangle critiques of inequality and conspiracy beliefs, building on recent agnostic and ethnographic approaches to conspiracy theories in an attempt, first, to think through their relation not only to disinformation but also to social inequality, and, second, to establish conspiracy theories as a potentially valuable form of social critique in pluralist democracies. Hesselbein argues that “[m]any conspiracy theories are thus better understood as ‘situated knowledges’, even if partial and flawed ones, which are an outcome of or reaction to democratic crises and social inequality, rather than the cause or driver of such crises” (p. 129), and can even be seen as a form of resistance to inequality.

3. Inequalities in the Mitigation of Disinformation

As a third type of intersection between disinformation and inequalities, this special issue asks how inequalities are, or should be, addressed in initiatives that aim at mitigating the production, the propagation and the impacts of disinformation.

One way to approach this intersection is to examine the ways in which the mitigation of disinformation contributes to reducing inequalities. For example, fact-checkers contribute to the mitigation of gender inequalities through the fact-checking of gender disinformation (Pérez Pereiro *et al.*, 2024). Critical news literacy can be used to address race, racism, and colonialism in (dis)information (Higdon & Butler, 2023). Yet another example is provided by prejudiced communities who develop counter-discourse initiatives to combat disinformation narratives that target them (Vrikki & Malik, 2019).

One article in this special issue focuses on the mitigation of disinformation. Similar to Hodson’s article (*see disinformation as a source of inequalities*), Adolfo **Carratalá**’s paper deals with disinformation against LGBTQ+ people. However, it does not focus on the actors who spread this type of disinformation, but on those who organise themselves to counter it. More precisely, Carratalá examines the communication strategies of three Spanish trans advocacy organisations on Instagram, in 2023. The findings suggest that the activists rely mostly on proactive communication strategies involving confrontation (denunciation, condemnation), pedagogic explanation, and community support. Overall, countering anti-trans disinformation is approached less as “technical verification”, as in fact-checking, than as “ideological refra-

ming” whereby trans rights are (re)articulated as a matter of human rights. By relying on such a human rights paradigm, Carratalá argues, trans activist organisations challenge the hegemony of journalistic standards in the fight against disinformation and broaden the repertoire of counter-disinformation strategies.

There is much more to say about how inequalities come into play in the mitigation of disinformation. Here too, we wish to call on the disinformation research community to explore this intersection further. One way to do it is to acknowledge that inequalities shape the way in which initiatives aimed at mitigating disinformation are designed, implemented and experienced. For instance, disinformation responses by a privileged majority may neglect certain issues or areas of disinformation—such as race, racism and colonialism (Higdon & Butler, 2023)—, neglect potential beneficiary groups, or fail to address their needs and expectations. Inequalities can also be found in the uneven distribution of tools, funding, networks and expertise required to carry out such initiatives. On the user side, inequalities may prevent certain target groups from participating in these initiatives or from gaining benefits from their participation. A key question then is whether such initiatives succeed in overcoming inequalities or whether they contribute to perpetuating (or even creating) inequalities—and if so, how can this boomerang effect be avoided.

4. Beyond Disinformation?

The articles in this special issue offer diverse approaches to the intersections between disinformation and inequalities. However, they all share at least one common thread: their authors—more or less explicitly and for various reasons—express a certain discomfort with the notion of disinformation and, ultimately, draw on other concepts to clarify, broaden, or even replace the notion of disinformation. This tendency may suggest a certain skepticism about the added value of the notion, especially when it comes to problematising the complex and subtle intersections between disinformation and inequalities.

Colombier Vanijaka points to the limits of the intent-based categories within the current “information disorder” framework (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Indeed, she argues that focusing on intent obscures how the informational landscape surrounding the deportation of Uyghurs in Thailand is shaped “by enforced silence, strategic ambiguity, selective visibility, narrative substitution, and the structural

absence of Uyghur testimony” (p. 17). These dynamics of *information opacity* “point toward a broader systemic condition rather than discrete acts of disinformation” (p. 17).

Kanižaj, Osmančević and Vidulić similarly suggest broadening the perspective on information disorders. The authors argue that the main problem in Croatian news coverage of migrant workers is not overt and intended falsehood but a broader, multidimensional process of misrepresentation. Through mostly unintentional mechanisms such as framing, source exclusion and structured dehumanization, news media can mislead the public about migrant work. In this sense, Kanižaj *et al.* shift the focus from disinformation as such to the unequal representational conditions through which some disadvantaged groups are systematically spoken about, but rarely allowed to speak for themselves – which is indeed an argument that is very similar to the one put forward by Colombier Vanijaka.

While still arguing in favour of the concept of disinformation, **Hodson** introduces a related notion of *disinformation by omission*. According to the author, deciding whether Rogan actually believes the anti-trans rhetoric that he amplifies on his podcast is not a central issue. What matters is the fact that he intentionally shares this kind of discourse for his own profit, without any consideration for fact-checking and dissenting points of view. This leads Hodson to argue that disinformation on the JRE podcast – and more broadly in a capitalist digital environment – operates *through omission*:

By exclusively platforming voices that align with his own ideology, Rogan practices disinformation by omission. By not including fact checks and by failing to include voices that are more supportive of the trans community, Rogan is facilitating the spread of misleading, faulty and false information. (p. 99)

Hesselbein’s article on conspiracy theories questions our understanding of the dichotomy between true and false information. He invites us to explore the grey areas of disinformation, to pay attention to *power struggles in knowledge production*, and to consider conspiracy theories as “akin to interpretive frameworks – that is, theories – developed to understand and critique society (whether or not justifiable)” (p. 119).

Finally, in his study of the communication strategies adopted by activist organisations to counter anti-trans disinformation, **Carratalá**

argues that disinformation, defined as “factually false claims”, is not separable from *hate speech*, understood as “expressions of hostility, insult, or dehumanization”. While both concepts are different, Carratalá finds that activist organisations reject such a distinction: “the organisations’ refusal to disentangle falsehoods from hate speech reflects a relational understanding in which fake news is perceived not just as an error, but as a component of a broader “*hostile narrative*” aimed at dehumanization” (p. 161).

These conceptual discussions on disinformation do not necessarily mean that we should get rid of this notion. Rather, they invite disinformation researchers to keep in mind that disinformation is only one aspect of broader and diverse information and communication “disorders” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) whose foundations are to be found in deeper and intertwined social, political, cultural, economic, and technological logics.

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