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Special issue:

Disinformation, social media, and the future of open debate across languages and cultures

edited by Nicoletta Vasta and Pietro Manzella

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ESP Across Cultures is indexed in Scopus and is covered in *Linguistics & Language Behaviour Abstracts*, *MLA International Bibliography*, *Translation Studies Abstracts* and *Bibliography of Translation Studies*.

Foreword

Welcome to volume 23 of ESP Across Cultures. It has been a pleasure and an honour for us to host this special issue of the journal coedited by Nicoletta Vasta and Pietro Manzella. This has proved to be a particularly rewarding experience for us as it has taken us into a slightly different area of cross-cultural studies focusing on the English language. We are sure you will enjoy this selection of papers.

Christopher Williams
Denise Milizia

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE. DISINFORMATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE FUTURE OF OPEN DEBATE ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Nicoletta Vasta and Pietro Manzella
(University of Udine, Italy)

The complex relationship between disinformation, social media, and the future of open debate in a globalized digital landscape has become particularly evident and pressing in our western society, especially because, over the last two decades, we have witnessed a revolution in the way we communicate. Social media platforms have turned the traditional information flow upside down, prompting virtually anyone with an Internet connection to publish content, express opinions, and potentially reach millions of people around the globe, thus boosting opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue across geographical and ideological borders. At the same time, social media platforms have promoted a powerful form of democratization – digital democracy, or *e*-democracy, as it is commonly referred to (see, e.g., Bruns 2008; Hague and Loader 2005; Papacharissi 2002; Shane 2004) – in order "to short-circuit the representative process and look more to net-supported plebiscites and 'official' online debates in deciding issues of government policy" (Moore 2005: 55). As Jarrett (2009: 117) reminds us, "The promise of digital media, and in particular the Internet, has long been associated with its ability to reinvigorate the public sphere and democracy itself", even though, at times, it has dangerously blurred the boundaries between lay and expert discourse, viz. between science and fabrication or even conspiracy, as was the case, for instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic (see, e.g., Demata 2025; Demata *et al.* 2022; Jones 2021; Maci *et al.* 2024, viz. Case Studies, Section C).

Last but by no means least, such a borderless, grassroots-driven communicative environment has allowed, and is fortunately still allowing, voices that were once excluded from the public sphere to be heard. It has enabled, and is still enabling, civil rights movements to connect, rise up, and potentially influence real political change. On the other hand, as we all know, this revolution poses great risks and threats. As the gatekeepers of information – journalists, editors, publishers – have been replaced by algorithms and unfiltered virality, we are also witnessing the darker side of this communication age, characterized as it is by increasing disintermediation: Meta's decision, on January 7, 2025, to suspend third-party fact-checking for Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, allegedly due to "too many mistakes and too much censorship", and replace it with a system based on "community notes" (https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/

technology/meta-fact-checking-facebook.html[1]) is only one of the most disquieting recent developments. It has had global repercussions, e.g. in the EU (see the Parliamentary question to, and related answer by, the European Commission at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-000423_EN.html) and was considered at the time by President Biden as "shameful" (https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/technology/meta-mark-zuckerberg-trump.html).

Even before these 'digital' intrusions into the provision of reliable information and the shaping of public opinion, images, fake news and false narratives, and even conspiracy theories, have always existed. Nowadays, however, they are spreading with unprecedented speed and impact. And, more often than before, they are not just mistakes, i.e. mere examples of misinformation. They are, instead, intentional. They are "not simply […] historically false news, but […] discursively manipulative storylines and/or mixed narratives […] used to affect the logico-semantic processing and/or emotional resonance (i.e. positive/negative axiology) of crucial information" (Vasta 2023: 20) – in short, they are deliberate disinformation designed to deceive, manipulate, and divide, by blurring the boundary between truths and lies.

The Oxford Dictionaries' definition (at https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=it&lang=en&) of the Word of the Year 2016, "post-truth", suggests that we live in an era "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". As reported by Seargeant (2022: 21-22), a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon, related to Trump's first presidential mandate, was the attempt by White House spokesperson Kellyanne Conway to corroborate a false claim by White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who had stated that, in January 2017, Trump had attracted the largest crowd ever attending a Presidential Inauguration ceremony. This, in Conway's view, was to be construed as "alternative facts" which delegitimize alternative 'expert' opinions, namely the press's 'biased' assertion about the number of people present at the ceremony. On a more general plane:

> **[...] especially in a disintermediated digital landscape, the conceptual frameworks and underlying cultural constructs for the interpretation of events and processes risk being manipulated to reinforce 'mainstream' readings and related ideologically biased positions. Under such circumstances, contextualizing disputable or 'alternative facts' so as to challenge, fact-check and debunk fake news, prejudice and disinformation has become a crucial component of young (but not only young) generations' soft skills (Vasta 2023: 25).**

However, this is not simply a question of ideological bias: when engaging with AI chatbots, such as Gemini or ChatGPT, we have all encountered responses that are false or even blatantly incorrect, commonly referred to as AI "hallucinations". False or misleading content can spread faster and more widely than verified information, thereby distorting public communication and debate (see, e.g., Surjatmodjo *et al.* 2024); this is a well-known risk, due to AI's well-established behaviour which makes it impossible *not* to respond – for example even by producing a body of "artificial", i.e. inaccurate or nonexistent, case law references (Bailly *et al.* 2026) –, but it is neither the only risk nor,

[1] All webpages retrieved April 4, 2026.

perhaps, the most significant one. We turn to AI primarily because it is convenient, and because chatbots draw on huge knowledge archives easily accessible on the Internet, operating by processes of selection and reduction. Yet, this characteristic oversimplification clashes with what is traditionally associated, in every civilization, with the idea (especially in non-scientific, humanistic disciplines) of "truth" as a fluid, multi-faceted, context-dependent, and even contradictory or controversial concept.

The relationship between social media and open debate is deeply ambivalent, reflecting both emancipatory and destabilizing dynamics within contemporary information ecosystems. On the one hand, social media platforms and AI, in general, expand opportunities for participation and pluralism, potentially fostering learning and open debate while providing users with diverse perspectives. Indeed, some studies indicate that, when used reflectively, digital platforms can also support the development of critical thinking skills, particularly in educational contexts (see, e.g., Galindo-Domínguez *et al.* 2025). On the other hand, their algorithmic structures and attention economies often privilege emotionally charged, simplified, or misleading content, thereby undermining the conditions for critical thinking *per se*, defined (Ku *et al.* 2026, n.p.) as:

> a purposeful and reflective reasoning process that integrates analysis, evaluation, and reasoned application to action [and that, in social media settings,] can counteract the intuitive, heuristic responses often triggered by rapid information flow online, [...and thus] translates to evaluating the veracity and logical consistency of information and then making deliberate choices about whether to respond through sharing and commenting, or to withhold engagement.

A growing body of research highlights the central role of critical thinking in navigating this digital environment and in ultimately guiding AI, rather than being guided by it. Empirical studies (e.g. Orhan 2023) demonstrate, for instance, that higher levels of critical thinking and media literacy are positively associated with the crucial ability to detect misinformation on social media.

In the final analysis, we find ourselves today at a crossroads: on the one hand, we want to preserve the values of free speech, diversity of opinion, and open debate – values that are the pillars of democratic societies. On the other, we are forced to recognize how disinformation campaigns are threatening the very possibility of having any meaningful public discourse, especially when, while democratizing access to discourse, social media platforms simultaneously erode shared standards of truth and verification. How can we talk about the future of open debate if we can no longer ensure that the digital public square is a space for informed discussion rather than a battlefield of bots, trolls, and echo chambers, where, very often, we simply look for confirmation about what we are already persuaded to be the 'truth'? And what if the 'truth' appears to be blatantly manufactured, as is the case in and through Trump's Truth Social, but not only?

This Special Issue is an attempt to face up to these and other challenges. From a normative, pedagogical, and methodological perspective, the individual contributions illustrate, through different approaches and culture-specific case studies, how it is possible to resolve the tension between open debate and epistemic reliability, i.e. between pluralism and 'truth'. This diversity of approaches and case studies is vital inasmuch as, when assessing misinformation/disinformation, the challenge is not merely to debunk and correct false content, but to cultivate forms of reasoning that enable (especially

young) individuals to evaluate competing claims independently. And to do so, they must rely on well-established methods and tools of analysis – here, those offered by critical (multimodal) discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, sentiment analysis, as well as social media and propaganda theories.

The introductory paper by Philip Seargeant, "The Social Media Model of Propaganda, or How to Build a Propaganda Machine", not only provides the necessary sociohistorical backdrop to address and assess the pervasiveness and persistence, over time and across cultures, of the manipulation and/or fabrication of information for propaganda purposes; more significantly, it also frames the three key concepts of social media, disinformation and open debate as essential components of the role that propaganda plays in society today. After a brief overview of paradigmatic examples of propaganda machinery, which span across time and continents – from the Soviet Union of the 1910s and 1920s to several European countries during WWII and finally to the present day –, the paper investigates the particularly intense role that propaganda plays in our lives today by examining the ways in which the structure of modern communications technologies, viz. social media, is such that it facilitates all the key elements in major theories of propaganda. More specifically, as Seargeant convincingly argues, "viewing social media from the perspective of a propaganda model can provide us with a better understanding of the contemporary communications ecosystem, which not only lends itself to propagandistic manipulation but […] is structurally optimized to facilitate this with unprecedented efficiency and reach".

Focusing on "polarization" – i.e. one of Naim's (2023) 3 Ps which dominate 21st century politics together with "populism" and "post-truth", to which Seargeant adds a fourth, i.e. "propaganda" – Massimiliano Demata investigates anti-immigration discourse through the notorious case of Haitian migrants allegedly eating pets, which hit the headlines during Trump's 2024 presidential campaign as a blatant example of disinformation, or indeed of conspiracy theory. Through the lens of CDA, the paper explores polarizing and, consequently, discriminatory discourse practices (viz. those of "othering") in five key tweets posted on X (formerly Twitter), complemented by a corpus of the most influential comments they generated, which both disseminated and debunked the fake news. More specifically, the analysis shows that, mainly through authorization and moral legitimation strategies (van Leeuwen 2007), the narrative foregrounds and reinforces highly polarized opinions based on mutually incompatible truth claims, initially those of Trump supporters and the Haitian migrants, and subsequently those of Trump supporters and Trump opponents. In the final analysis, this is yet another illuminating example of how social media, besides shaping and polarizing public opinion, can serve as a means of legitimizing the marginalization of certain minority groups, which are construed as 'culturally-alien' through the manipulation of information about them.

Generally speaking, as mentioned above, social media platforms have revolutionized many aspects of social life, for example by enabling minority voices and pressure groups to be under the spotlight and to foster political change and open debate, for better or for worse. In these respects, Stefania Maci's paper is an illuminating window on how, in recent years, these platforms have, on the one hand, become critical arenas for debating gender-based violence, enabling victims to share experiences and sensitize public opinion; on the other hand, they have promoted new forms of control or abuse, as testified by the recent Italian sexist scandal over the Phica.eu platform, which, while leading to

the platform's closure, has more significantly opened up a debate about victim protection, platform responsibility and the need to educate people to be respectful in digital contexts. Maci's investigation offers a sentiment analysis of a corpus of 54 posts with a total of 427 comments uploaded to Facebook, X and Instagram. Her quanti-qualitative analysis, carried out using CorpusSense, pinpoints the distribution of semantic categories (e.g. *delegitimization, minimization, misogynist attacks* and *whataboutism*) across genders and across social platforms; at the same time, her analysis highlights, with special reference to the comments, the gender asymmetry typical of an as yet heavily patriarchal cultural context such as the Italian one. For our present purposes, one of the most significant takeaways from Maci's contribution is that "digital platforms are not neutral spaces, but places where hierarchies in Italian society are reproduced and at the same time contested".

Another polarizing socio-cultural issue dominating US politics since at least the early 1980s is what Polina Shvanyukova calls "the culture war over American education", which is nowadays an online battle waged by the Republican Party ultimately paving the way for Trump's Executive Order of March 20, 2025, purportedly suppressing the Federal Department of Education (DoE). The first stage of her investigation provides a diachronic and essentially intertextual examination of how the consolidation of conservative beliefs, such as "family values" and the 'traditional' family, ultimately contributed to the misrepresentation, for electoral gain during the 2024 Presidential campaign, of the true state of the balance of Federal and State powers in the management of Education. The second stage, instead, provides a synchronic and essentially comparative examination of a small corpus of Trump's Truth account posts linked to video-remixes of excerpts from the televised public signing of Trump's Executive Order. By combining the diachronic and synchronic perspectives, the paper thus provides a holistic investigation into the circulation of key conservative ideas across time, genres and the boundaries of offline and online environments. At the same time, it reveals, *inter alia*, the stagecraft quality of such televised events as Trump's public signings, and above all of the remixed shorts promoted in these posts – a visually manipulative aspect reappraised and expanded on, from a critical multimodal discourse analytical perspective, in the last two contributions to this volume.

Pietro Manzella's paper undertakes a critical examination of the European Union's communication strategy for, and automated translation of, the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR). He focuses on the EU's "Myth Buster" webpage, which is, *de facto*, a trust-building exercise to promote and shape public perceptions of EU environmental policies across different languages and cultures, but which seems to reinforce the epistemic and cultural hegemony of the English language. Indeed, although translating is mandatory to enhance accessibility to EU policy measures, the translation of this webpage into Italian (and presumably into the other 23 EU official languages, for that matter) is automated and seemingly demoted to a secondary check-up status. Manzella shows that, within the page, visual discourse (viz. icons) functions as a 'shortcut', pre-emptive strategy to ward off the criticisms, claimed to be false "myths", that can be levelled against the EUDR and its implementation procedures. The paper ultimately advocates for the need to detect potential political manipulation and/or accidental misinformation due to translation inaccuracies, a risk which always arises in the EU's complex reality, especially when carefully checked translations are not used.

Visual discourse, viz. visual storytelling, is also the focus of Nicoletta Vasta's concluding contribution, which, drawing on Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis, explores the construction and monumentalization, in the contemporary post-truth era, of political leaders as resilient, divinely sanctioned, or morally righteous heroes. The analysis is grounded in the concepts of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, framing, othering, and intertextual thematic formations, i.e. "a community's recurrent saids and dones, [as well as] the semiotic resources for saying and doing" (Lemke 1988: 32) and foregrounds the ideological, unifying function of master narratives, myths, and archetypes across diverse cultures. Focusing on two paradigmatic case studies from U.S. politics – the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in July 2024 and George W. Bush's "superempowered" presidency during the War on Terror –, the article shows how iconic photographs, political speeches, and historical artworks (notably Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People) are remediated across media platforms and cultures to naturalize ideological positions, mobilize emotional appeal, and enact moral polarization, while blurring the boundaries between fact and fabrication. Ultimately, the paper highlights the urgency of fostering critical multimodal literacy as a key civic competence, which can expose the hidden mechanisms governing manipulative discourse practices.

In conclusion, what all the contributions in this volume seem to be upholding is that the quality of open debate in the age of social media depends less on the platforms themselves than on the interplay between technological affordances and users' critical and cross-cultural competencies. Strengthening critical thinking – through cross-cultural education, fact-checking, and media literacy – emerges as a key condition for sustaining a genuinely open and informed public sphere. With this aim in mind, we hope that this Special Issue will make a contribution to research on disinformation, social media and open debate and be, itself, a source of reflection and critical thinking, especially for discourse analysts and critically-aware university students.

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THE SOCIAL MEDIA MODEL OF PROPAGANDA (OR HOW TO BUILD A PROPAGANDA MACHINE)

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Abstract

Politics today is dominated by what Naim (2023) calls the 3 Ps: populism, polarization and post-truth. To this we should add a fourth: propaganda. The word, in English at least, still has something of a twentieth century feel about it, conjuring up images of graphic posters from the First and Second World Wars. But while styles of political persuasion have existed for as long as human society has, the role propaganda plays in our lives today is arguably more intense than it has been in decades. And whereas a few years ago, Zuboff (2019) talked of an age of 'surveillance capitalism', this has now transformed into an era of 'computational totalitarianism'. This paper examines how the relationship between language and technology has produced the environment which has allowed the malevolent radicalism of today's politics to flourish, focusing specifically on the ways in which modern communications technologies provide affordances which complement almost precisely the fundamental components in major theories of propaganda.

1. Propaganda machines

In his book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Minds* (1965), Jacques Ellul argued that propaganda should be understood not merely as a set of messages or ideas, but as a technological phenomenon, that is, a systematic, organized technique designed to influence large populations. He emphasized that modern propaganda relies on communications technology to reach vast audiences in an efficient and effective manner, making it inseparable from the tools that deliver it. For Ellul, in other words, propaganda is a methodical application of technical means to shape public opinion and behaviour on a large scale (Ellul 1964; Marlin 2014).

Throughout the twentieth century a number of technologies were designed and developed which one could call, quite literally, propaganda machines. These can be defined as physical devices or pieces of equipment specifically engineered or adapted for the large-scale dissemination of ideological messages. Unlike ordinary media tools, they were purpose-built to deliver controlled narratives to targeted audiences, often bypassing or restricting alternative sources of information.

There are multiple examples of innovations of this sort. There was, for instance, the Monroe bomb. Developed during World War Two by US Army Air Forces Captain James Monroe, this was created for the sole purpose of distributing propaganda among enemy forces (PWD SHAEF 1945). The device consisted of a cardboard cylinder packed with propaganda leaflets, which was then inserted into a bomb casing. Each bomb could carry up to 80,000 leaflets. Dropped from an aircraft over enemy territory, the bomb would descend to a preset altitude before a small detonator exploded the cylinder, scattering its contents across the landscape. The leaflets, addressed directly to enemy soldiers, sought to sow doubt about the cause being fought for and to undermine morale. Other nations developed similar devices – the Germans, Soviets, and North Vietnamese all designed their own versions, operating in much the same way. Such weapons have not disappeared either: videos circulate today of Russian forces deploying leaflet bombs in Ukraine (Yahoo! News 2024).

The Monroe bomb was, in essence, a purpose-built propaganda machine, engineered to spread ideologically loaded messages to the widest possible audience. By the end of the war, the Allies had dropped an estimated 500 million leaflets behind enemy lines in Europe. Further notable examples of propaganda machinery include the *Volksempfänger* or 'People's Receiver', a cheap, mass-produced radio introduced in Nazi Germany in 1933 that was designed to give the population easy access to the regime's broadcasts while limiting their ability to tune in to foreign stations. In the Soviet Union of the 1910s and 1920s, agit-trains and agit-boats were sent across the countryside, equipped with printing presses, cinemas, libraries and lecturers to spread Bolshevik ideology to remote areas (Heftberger 2015; Kenez 1985). During the Second World War, Britain built the Aspidistra radio transmitter, a vast shortwave installation in Sussex that was created specifically to beam 'black propaganda' (i.e. misleading information disguised as coming from a trusted source) and fake German broadcasts into occupied Europe (Newton 2019).

The Nazis also made use of mobile film units – trucks fitted with projectors and screens that travelled to rural communities to show propaganda movies, including the films of Leni Riefenstahl. The Soviets developed mobile printing trucks in the 1920s and 1930s to mass-produce agitational posters on the move, while Imperial Japan employed portable radio broadcasting units under the banner of the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' to disseminate pro-Japanese, anti-Western messages across occupied territories in Asia (Magpantay 2024). Each of these devices and systems functioned as purpose-built machinery for the distribution of propaganda.

From Harold Lasswell (1927; 1938) and Walter Lippmann (1927), through Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988), to twenty-first century scholarship on computational propaganda (e.g. Woolley 2023), theorists have stressed the way that propaganda is inseparable from the technological systems that deliver it. In some cases, as with most of the examples above, technology is used to facilitate the dissemination of propaganda; in others the act of engaging with the technology is a constituent part of the way the propaganda works. It is this latter role of technology which I will explore in this paper in respect to how social media can be viewed as the ideal 'propaganda machine'.

2. Social media, disinformation and the future of open debate

This paper arises from a conference which focuses on three concepts which play a prominent part in today's politics: social media, disinformation and the future of open debate. Each of these come from a different conceptual category, yet they are nonetheless closely connected and together provide some of the theoretical foundations for an examination of the social media model of propaganda. Social media is a communications technology, along with a set of social practices that have grown up around the use of that technology (Baym 2015; Waisbord 2018). Disinformation is a 'genre' of communication, in the broadest sense of the word (Bakhtin 1986). In fact, one could characterize it as one genre (fake or fabricated information) masquerading as another (reliable news or information) (Tandoc *et al.* 2018). And open debate is part genre-of-communication, part social-ideal. Especially when coupled with the idea of 'the future', it refers to practices which we consider important and necessary for an equitable and democratic society (Habermas 1989), and thus to which we, as a society, aspire.

What then do the three have in common? One thing that links them, particularly in the context of political discourse, is that they are all components of the role that propaganda plays in society today. For the purposes of this discussion, propaganda is political communication which draws on deceptive means to manipulate people's beliefs and, ideally, actions in line with the agenda of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell 1986).

The spreading of disinformation is a key strategy in propaganda programmes, and one which has been consistently highlighted in popular and media discourse over the last nine or ten years (ever since the 'fake news' crisis of 2015/16) (Maci *et al.* 2023). Social media is a very important technology for the spreading of disinformation and the effective use of propaganda (Lilleker and Surowiec 2020). And open debate is antithetical to the way that propaganda works as a form of communication. Or to put it another way, propaganda is primarily a monologic rather than dialogic form of communication which acts to close down public discussion and debate (Marková 2008). And, by closing down public discussion and debate, propaganda aims to corrode democratic politics.

3. Building a propaganda machine

Let us return to the idea of a propaganda machine and the hypothetical question of what such a machine, if purposely designed, might look like today. The first step in designing such a machine is to identify the key features of propaganda campaigns, and then look to how a medium of communication can best facilitate these features. Propaganda campaigns can take many different forms and use a variety of techniques, but it is possible to distil these down into a short list of generic features (Seargeant 2026). We can start with a very simple model of communication which consists of the following four elements: Speaker – message – medium – audience.

The formula goes that a speaker transmits a message via a medium or channel to a receiver/audience. This is the skeleton structure for communication (Lasswell 1948; Shannon and Weaver 1949), and although theoretically rather primitive, is useful as a jumping-off point for this analysis.

Propaganda then is a type of communication which manages the following dynamics between these four elements. It involves (1) a particular relationship between speaker and audience; and (2) a particular type of message; which has (3) a particular aim. Identification and theorization of these various elements have a long history in the study of propaganda (e.g. Pratkanis and Aronson 2001; Taylor 2003; Tchakhotine 1940), and in drawing on this we can usefully categorize the way that these three dynamics are, in turn, made up of eight component parts:

1. The relationship between speaker and audience involves:

- Targeting a specific audience

This is to say, using tailored messaging for specific groups (e.g. soldiers, civilians, opponents). Where possible, this involves surveying and measuring the mood of the public, and then shaping the messaging accordingly. In this way one creates 'scientifically' targeted messaging;

- Repetition and saturation

Propaganda should be ubiquitous and relentless. The aim is to flood society with your message so that it becomes completely normalized;

- Controlling the flow of information

This involves tactics such as cherry-picking facts, giving only one side of the argument, and using various forms of censorship so as to boost your message and block out alternative points of view. Again, this helps normalize your message and give the impression that it is the mainstream, if not sole, way of understanding the world.

2. The type of message involves:

- Use of emotional appeal

In order best to persuade people, content should provoke a strong emotional reaction using fear, pride, anger, hope etc., and in this way, bypass critical thinking;

- Glorification and demonization

The messaging should always vilify your opponents and idealize your allies. Effective propaganda directs people's anger by clearly identifying who or what to blame for problems in the world. This can, and often does, involve creating a principal enemy who becomes the target of all attacks;

- Simplified messaging

Messaging should avoid abstract ideas and appeal instead only to the emotions. It should constantly repeat the same few ideas over and again; use stereotyped phrases and slogans to make ideas easily digestible; and label people and events with distinctive, easy-to-remember phrases;

- Authority and trust

Messaging should cite experts, leaders, or 'common sense' so as to legitimize its claims in the eyes of the target audience.

3. The particular aim consists of:

- The call to action

This directs the target audience's behaviour (e.g. voting, enlisting, boycotting), and encourages them to participate in the political process in some form or other.

Based on these key features, an effective propaganda machine should therefore have the following capabilities:

- Be able to identify and target a specific audience, using research to survey the mood of this audience and adapt the messaging accordingly;
- Use emotional appeals rather than reason to ensure that its messages are persuasive. Create messages which are simple to understand, often involving slogans and constant repetition;
- Be able to saturate the environment with these messages so that there is 'no escape' from them;
- Cite so-called 'experts' and other authorities to give credibility to its messages;
- Identify some group in society to label as its enemy and blame them for everything that is wrong with the world;
- Control the flow of information so that only the stories that help push its own agenda get told;
- And finally, encourage participation from the public so that they become part of the political movement for which the propaganda is advocating.

If we look back at the leaflet bombs, we can see they only carry out a couple of these elements: *targeting an audience* and *spreading the message as widely as possible*. The rest of the features are covered by the leaflets themselves which are, in essence, a technology that goes right back to the early days of the printing press (Bagchi 2016). Figure 1 shows how 'legacy' media – newspapers, radio and television – cover these components, which allows them to be exploited as forms of propaganda (despite not being designed specifically for that purpose).

So how do modern media technologies facilitate this list of propaganda components? Let us look through these components one by one.

- Targeting a specific audience

An important element in systemized propaganda programmes from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards has been the use of technologies for surveying and measuring the mood of the public and then adapting the messaging accordingly. Nazi Germany's Ministry of Propaganda during World War Two, for instance, carried out extensive polling in order to 'take the pulse of the population', and then used this to refine the content of their communication (Taylor 2003). In eras such as this, the act of broadcasting and the act of measuring the effect of that broadcasting were separate.

With digital media, both these capabilities are built into the same technology. The business model for social media companies is not simply engagement – keeping users on the platform so they can be exposed to more advertising – but harvesting behavioural data which can then be used to create more persuasive content (Zuboff 2019). In other words, social media companies combine within themselves capabilities which are perfectly suited for propaganda. Social media data can be used to categorize audiences by

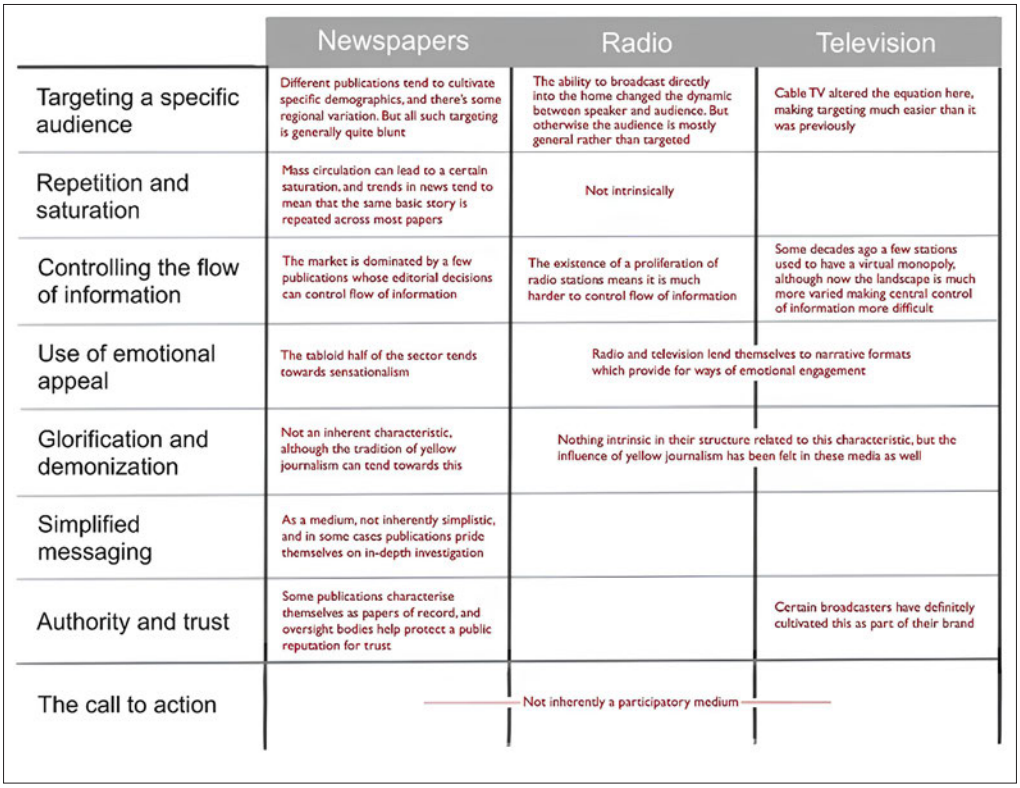

Figure 1. Legacy media and the core elements of propaganda communication

psychological traits (fear-driven, tribalistic, altruistic), and methods such as sentiment analysis (Wankhade *et al.* 2022) can be used to track emotional responses to adjust messaging (e.g. shift from anger to fear if resistance emerges), resulting in the crafting of personalized propaganda that speaks directly to individual concerns. There was outrage a decade ago when Cambridge Analytica did (or at least, attempted to do) precisely this, but the capabilities for it are an essential part of the business model (Briant 2022).

- Repetition and saturation

A second point about propaganda is that it should be ubiquitous and relentless. The message needs to be internalized by the audience as common sense, as 'just the way things are'. Propaganda aims to create or bolsters a worldview, and one which is apparently shared by the majority of other people. Again, the design of social media is almost ideally suited to creating this impression.

The message disseminated by social media is not simply broadcast by a single or small group of sources. It is repeated by numerous individual accounts, both real and fabricated (Du *et al.* 2019). The volume of posts on a given topic not only gives persuasive weight to the message, it also makes it appear as if this is the standard perspective on that topic.

If everyone is repeating the message then it is more likely to be viewed as consensus opinion (Woolley 2023), which in turn translates to it being seen as 'the truth'. Virality, memes, the social media influencer, and social media bots are all social-media-native phenomena which are centred around wide dissemination and repetition of a message.

- Controlling the flow of information

I mentioned earlier that propaganda is monologic rather than dialogic. The image of social media as the modern-day public square (Spaid 2019) would suggest that dialogism – including open debate – is an essential characteristic of these platforms. But algorithmic manipulation of the feed means that what people post to social media is always curated, and this curation, while hidden, is always controlling the flow of information (Gausen *et al.* 2022). Alongside technological control of information flow, social practices such as cancelling, pile-ons and other forms of social attack and exclusion, as well as phenomena such as the filter bubble and echo chamber, also restrict the flow of ideas and information.

Many of these are types of informal or social censorship which act as a form of normative social control (Post 1998; Ng 2020). So the mixture of the design and the social consequences of the design offer immense possibilities for controlling the flow of information.

- Use of emotional appeal

Propaganda has always exploited the human weakness for the sensational and the emotive, in no small part because this bypasses reasoned reflection (Martel *et al.* 2020).

Social media algorithms tend to promote content which attracts attention and engagement; they do this because engagement is the basis of the business model by which social media companies operate (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021). And content which attracts attention is that which provokes a strong emotional reaction and/or is sensational.

Emotion aroused by conflict is particularly effective. So once again, the style of expression encouraged by the platforms naturally tends towards the emotionally provocative.

- Glorification and demonization

The concepts of glorification and demonization are essentially both processes of taking an extremist view on attitudes towards people or events. They simplify complex realities into absolute categories (see below), leaving little room for nuance or moderation. Both rely on strong emotional appeals rather than rational reflection, glorification by inspiring admiration or unquestioning loyalty, and demonization by provoking fear, anger or hatred (Decker and Lord 2023). The need that social media culture has for conflict to attract attention means that extremist views – ones which people feel compelled to attack or defend – is again almost an essential element of the business model.

- Simplified messaging

Extremist and emotionally-charged views are best served by simplism. Simplism strips the nuance and complexity from issues, reducing them to basic ideas possessed of an immediate resonance (Andreottola and Sartori 2025). In other words, simplism is an almost natural by-product of emotional appeal and glorification/demonization. Or,

to put it in more straightforward terms, platforms reward engagement; and simple, punchy content gets the most engagement.

In addition to this, format constraints of the platforms – number of characters allowed, length of video etc. – favour simplism, as does the 'infinite scrolling' design, which means that users consume huge volumes of content rapidly, with little time for reflection. All of which results in what one could characterize as meme culture – with memes being inherently reductive in the way they flatten arguments into punchlines (Anderau and Barbarrusa 2024).

- Authority and trust

Authority is a basic component of Aristotle's three-part model of rhetoric in that all parts of the model depend on the speaker's perceived credibility and right to persuade (Aristotle 2007; Amossy 2001). Propaganda regularly draws on this as part of its persuasive toolkit, but does so in deceptive or manipulative ways. The 'democratization of voice' which social media was lauded for in its early days (Benkler 2006), whereby the publishing of opinions was opened up to a far larger cohort of people than had been possible with one-to-many technologies like television and the newspaper, led to the undermining of traditional sources of authority, and their replacement with a wide of array of alternatives (Enroth 2023). This has vastly altered the criteria for how people measure authority and trust, which in turn provides perfect conditions for propaganda to manufacture legitimacy for its alternative view of reality.

- The call to action

The final component for propaganda is participation. An alternative (or at least closely related) term for social media, popular some years ago, was 'participatory media', while the defining feature of Web 2.0 (another term frequently used in the 2010s) was that the audience did not simply consume content, they contributed to its creation (leading to the coinage of words such as 'prosumer' – a blend of producer and consumer) (Howard 2008).

Participation at its most basic includes liking or reposting content. This has the effect not only of spreading that content more widely, but also prompting the algorithm to promote it even further. But from a propaganda perspective, participation also has an important psychological effect. Not only does propaganda work towards the specific goal of influencing thought and action, but through acts of participation the audience becomes psychologically invested in the endeavour (Ambuehl 2022; Leiser 2022).

The upshot of all this is that social media design boosts a style of discourse which matches all aspects of the basic narrative, stylistic and interactive structure of propaganda.

4. A propaganda analysing machine

One argument that follows from this cross-referencing of the architecture and affordances of social media with the essential elements of propaganda is that modern social media platforms already have many features of a propaganda machine, yet there is a difference between them related to intent. Social media platforms are promoted (often by themselves) as neutral infrastructures that allow users to share content and

communicate with each other (Ali 2024; Chander and Krishnamurthy 2018). People supposedly post freely, and algorithms are there to guide them towards relevant content. A propaganda machine, on the other hand, would be something deliberately engineered to manipulate public perception and control what people think. It does not rely on organic engagement, but instead actively manipulates the spread of content, and controls what people see and do not see. In other words, a social media platform would only become a propaganda machine when those in power learn how to exploit its structure for ideological control. The other supposed difference is ownership. Social media platforms are owned by tech companies driven primarily by profit, whereas a propaganda machine would be controlled by a government, political party, or other ideological group with a clear political agenda.

Which brings me to the last point I want to discuss: the concept of 'affordances'. In the context of social media, 'affordances' refer to the built-in features and design choices that shape how users interact with a platform – enabling or constraining certain actions and thus influencing user behaviour. An important point about them is that they are part technical – the result of the design of the platform – and part the product of a user's understanding of their availability and how they work (Tagg *et al.* 2017). Affordances thus refer to the capabilities the platform has *and* the knowledge that people have to exploit this. As such, affordances inevitably exist differently for different people even when they are stable across a platform.

Whereas we mostly talk of affordances in terms of the average user of a platform, it can also be useful to think of them as they apply to those who have oversight or control of the technology or have the technological know-how to leverage full aspects of the platform. Or to put it another way, how they apply to those in a position to take full advantage of, in the context of this discussion, the propaganda possibilities of the platform.

What has become increasingly evident recently, with the rapid consolidation of power among a small number of extraordinarily wealthy technology company owners, is the extent to which control over digital infrastructures now translates into an unparalleled capacity to shape public discourse and influence political processes (Norden and Weiner 2025). This concentration of technological and economic power reveals how the affordances of social media platforms, initially designed to maximize engagement and behavioural prediction – can be strategically exploited to advance particular ideological ends. Whereas in earlier periods the pursuit of profit and the pursuit of political power were often represented as distinct and even competing motivations for the tech industry (Lindman *et al.* 2023), in the contemporary digital economy this separation has largely dissolved, as economic gain and political influence have become deeply intertwined within the same networks of technological control and informational capital (Khanal *et al.* 2025).

Where does all this leave us? Viewing social media from the perspective of a propaganda model – and in doing so, analysing precisely what this entails – can provide us with a better understanding of the details and implications of the relationship between politics, technology and technology corporations. What we are witnessing at this present moment is a shift from an age of 'surveillance capitalism' to an era of what can perhaps be termed 'computational totalitarianism'.

As I have outlined, the structure of social media is such that it facilitates all the elements central to propaganda. The set-up of this mirrors the propaganda model of media put forward by Herman and Chomsky (1988) which, in broad terms, views corporate media as profit-driven entities that prioritize the selling of their audience to advertisers, rather than focusing on high-quality journalism which serves the public interest. The situation as concerns social media is that there is no pretence that platform is creating high-quality journalism – or indeed even promoting high-quality journalism. Surveillance capitalism in this respect is a modern updating of the 20th century propaganda model of media.

Yet what we have seen in the last few years is how easily the use of this technology can focus not just on economic exploitation of the population (which involves a marked capitalist-ideological element), but on the take-over of the entire political system. An example of the way that world leaders are aware of, and actively pursue, the affordances that this allows them was acknowledged recently in a meeting that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had with US influencers at the Israeli Consulate in New York. During the meeting he framed social media as a critical 'weapon' for his government and stated that, as methods of warfare evolve, Israel must adapt by fighting on the new frontlines, with social media platforms being the most important of these (Qarehgozlou 2025; Shamala 2025). He specifically highlighted the potential US deal to force the sale of TikTok, describing it as the 'most important purchase going on right now' and the role that Elon Musk, as owner of X, had been playing in US politics. The comments were made at a time of widespread international condemnation of Israel's military actions in Gaza and were presented as a strategy to solidify a support base in the US that Netanyahu said was 'being challenged systematically'. Netanyahu is hardly the only leader with this approach to the propaganda possibilities of social media platforms, of course (Meredith 2021; Stognei 2025).

Back in the early twentieth century there was a trend of thought that propaganda was essential for a well-functioning democracy. Here, for example, is Edward Bernays (2013: 160), one of the most important earliest theorists, on the subject:

> When used for social purposes, [propaganda] is among our most valuable contributions to the efficient functioning of modern society. The techniques can be subverted; demagogues can utilize the techniques for antidemocratic purposes with as much success as can those who employ them for socially desirable ends. The responsible leader, to accomplish social objectives, must therefore be constantly aware of the possibilities of subversion.

At present, it is probably fair to say that responsible and ethically-grounded leadership is in short supply. More troubling still is the nature of the contemporary communications ecosystem, which not only lends itself to propagandistic manipulation but, as detailed in this paper, is structurally optimized to facilitate this with unprecedented efficiency and reach.

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POLARIZATION AND OTHERING IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION: HAITIAN PET-EATING MIGRANTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper examines how the claim that Haitian immigrants in Ohio had abducted, killed and eaten household pets became a focal point of ideological and discursive polarization in the 2024 US presidential campaign, reinforcing the prominence of immigration as one of its central issues. While this narrative constituted a blatant example of disinformation, described by some as a conspiracy theory, it was nevertheless deployed strategically by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and his campaign to reinforce his anti-immigration message. The discursive and communication strategies employed both to support and to debunk the narrative construct conflicting versions of reality in digital environments. The paper analyses five key tweets posted on X (formerly Twitter) together with a corpus of the most visible comments they generated. These tweets and their comments crafted and disseminated the fake news story. They illustrate how strategies of "othering" and legitimation foreground the polarizing dimension of the narrative as it was spread among, as well as co-constructed by, social media users. Specifically, the narrative became the focus of polarization on two related levels: first between Trump supporters and the Haitian migrants, and then between Trump supporters and Trump opponents, who diverged over the truth value of the news story.

1. Introduction

One of the most striking episodes to emerge from the 2024 US presidential campaign was the narrative according to which some Haitian migrants living in Springfield, Ohio, had abducted, killed and eaten pets belonging to local residents (Hesson *et al.* 2024; Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024; Cruz *et al.* 2026). The narrative arose from the conflation of several isolated incidents that occurred in the second half of 2024 and whose veracity was, at the very best, debatable (e.g. Reuters Fact Check 2024). Republicans and Donald Trump's own campaign seized upon the supposed incident and turned it into a key element of Trump's anti-immigration platform, presenting it as further evidence of the fact that immigrants posed a danger to the USA and constituted a problem requiring action. The conspiracy theory was repeatedly debunked, even by Ohio Republican officers, but it still became a major talking point in the 2024 presidential

campaign and was cited by Trump himself during the presidential debate with Democrat candidate Kamala Harris on September 10th. The claim also generated a conspicuous number of AI-created memes which provided the narrative with a powerful visual articulation. The narrative is paradigmatic of the way disinformation currently operates: unfounded or unverified rumours emerge on social media; reports and photos are manipulated and assembled to construct a putative news item; social media users share the story, which then catches the attention of major news outlets and, finally, becomes the topic of conversation at the highest levels of politics and the media. In effect, the narrative is heavily contested and generates deep polarization within public opinion, attracting the support of those who firmly believe it as well as the attacks of those who reject it, thereby shifting the debate onto more volatile political terrain.

This paper aims to reveal some of the strategies used on social media, and specifically on X, to construct the pet-eating narrative as an instrument in the construction of the "other", the migrant, and, as a consequence, to intensify polarization within public opinion regarding this issue. Such strategies are grounded in, and exploit, the affordances of social media themselves: in the current media environment, disinformation and conspiracy theories are not only routinely deployed to gain consensus, but also constitute the foundations of a discourse which, despite its often tenuous connection to reality, actually passes as *true* and is shaping socio-political discourses and processes in many nations (Demata *et al.* 2022).

The dataset used in this study consists of five tweets originally posted on X and selected not for numerical representativeness, but for their high degree of discursive recurrence across journalistic and public commentary. More specifically, these tweets were identified on the basis of their repeated citation or discussion in coverage appearing in major news outlets. Their inclusion was therefore guided by a criterion of discursive prominence and intertextual recirculation rather than breadth of sampling. In this sense, the dataset is intentionally small but analytically strategic, as it captures particularly salient utterances that functioned as nodal points in the wider public construction of the issue under examination.

The analytical focus of the study is therefore not on the quantitative distribution of tweets but on the discursive mechanisms through which these highly visible utterances contribute to the construction and circulation of a rumour within the media ecosystem. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question: Which legitimation (or de-legitimation) strategies, authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis, are mobilized in the five seed tweets to frame the rumour as credible or implausible?

The tweets will be analysed by using some of the strategies identified by Critical Discourse Analysis, with particular attention to strategies of legitimation (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), and by drawing on the conceptualization of conspiracy theories as an "epistemic masquerade" (Demata 2025a and 2025b). The analysis of this case study points to the fact that disinformation and conspiracy theories often function as highly effective instruments of persuasion which may become normalized within political discourse. Disinformation and conspiracy theories further contribute to both the polarization and the construction of the "other" which have increasingly come to characterize contemporary political discourse. However, othering and polarization are not simply rhetorical moves or discursive strategies: they exemplify,

at the discourse level, the ideological fracture existing between different social groups regarding the very idea of "facts" and "truth". The putative truthfulness of the pet-eating narrative is negotiated through discursive strategies that legitimize the veracity of spurious claims and construct (online) publics as active agents in the production and legitimation of the news.

2. Critical approaches to news, disinformation and conspiracy theories in the online environment

News discourse plays a central role in society, as it constructs representations of world events on the basis of shared values and beliefs and serves to circulate them in the public sphere. News is strictly connected to social structure and systems of knowledge. It is instrumental in legitimizing particular power relations through its discursive representations of facts, events and social actors, and the values expressed in news texts are crucial not only to how we know, but also to how we evaluate our social reality. For this reason, news discourse has long been a central object of investigation in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As a broad critical methodology, CDA investigates social conflict and its linguistic manifestations in discourse, particularly elements of dominance, difference, and resistance. The core assumption is that discourse does not merely represent social reality but actively shapes it, insomuch as it is instrumental in shaping and legitimizing socio-political hegemony, i.e. unequal relations of power. From this perspective, CDA considers news as a privileged site through which powerful social groups disseminate their values; it is in news discourse that the workings of hegemony and the naturalization of social differences and forms of discrimination take place and can be observed (van Dijk 1988, 1991; Fairclough 1989).

CDA was developed mainly following the typical top-bottom model of news construction and dissemination, whereby news is produced by mass media and consumed by its audience. More recently, this "vertical", hegemonic model has been challenged by the rise of online news, and especially by the circulation of news on social media. Indeed, in many countries, online news has surpassed traditional mass media, such as newspapers and TV, as the most common way of accessing news. In the USA, for example, in 2021 digital devices had become the most popular means to access news, and both news websites and social media were used by a majority of the US public for this purpose (Shearer 2021; Walker and Matsa 2021). The picture did not change in 2025, when most US adults still get news regularly from digital devices, with news websites and social media being their most frequent sources (Pew Research Center 2025).

The contemporary digital news environment encompasses online news websites, messaging services, social media and video-sharing platforms. Social media platforms, in particular, are highly heterogeneous in terms of news sources, largely because traditional hierarchies between news outlets (and between users in general) are being eroded in these environments: while professional media outlets, such as TV networks, newspapers and news agencies, all maintain a strong presence on platforms such as Facebook and X, the accessible affordances of social media and the relative lack of gatekeeping also enable ordinary prosumers to disseminate news items (KhosraviNik 2018). In recent years, digital discourse has further undergone a number of transformative developments such as memefication, whereby complex social and political issues

are condensed into easily shareable multimodal units that circulate rapidly across platforms. Another notable phenomenon is the junkification of online discourse, whereby the proliferation of low-information, highly repetitive content is optimized for engagement rather than deliberation. Contemporary online communication is also increasingly shaped by affective discourse with emotional expression driving visibility and interaction within algorithmically mediated environments. These developments all reflect broader shifts in participatory digital communication, where user-generated content and platform logics fundamentally reshape how discourse is produced and circulated online (KhosraviNik 2017, 2018, 2022).

The online environment is particularly susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories because users, including malign actors, have the virtually unchecked power to create and disseminate contents of all kinds, including material that is deliberately false or misleading. Misinformation "constitut[es] a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess and Lyons 2020: 10). It refers to false information that is spread unintentionally and without malicious intent. Disinformation, on the other hand, is a specific kind of information whose content is often manipulated and disseminated with the explicit intent of *deceiving* its audience. Disinformation is thus grounded in deliberate deception and refers to "the types of information that one could encounter online that could possibly lead to misperceptions about the actual state of the world" (Tucker *et al.* 2018: 3). The ultimate purpose of disinformation is therefore to promote ideas that support specific political actors and agendas while discrediting their opponents. Conspiracy theories are, in turn, narratives which are often built on the basis of disinformation but whose explicit aim is to explain the causes of certain events (Grieve and Woodfield 2023). In this sense, conspiracy theories posit that the causes of particular events lie in the actions of two or more hidden actors. Their proponents and supporters assume, on the basis of supposed "facts" they claim to have uncovered, that the epistemic authorities, i.e. politicians, the media, academia or, more broadly, the establishment, are conspiring to hide the truth about these events and deceive the populace (Uscinski 2020: 23-27).

The distinction between, on the one hand, legitimate news and, on the other, disinformation and conspiracy theories is increasingly blurred, with audiences frequently unable to distinguish between accurate reporting and manipulated or entirely fabricated content (Froehlich 2020). This blurring can be attributed to several factors. First of all, there is an overabundance of information available in the online digital environment, which makes it difficult for many users to identify and select reliable sources (Bawden and Robinson 2020). Second, the relative absence of gatekeeping has given virtually any social media user unlimited access to content-creation and consumption. As a consequence, on social media, content based on disinformation is often created and/or spread by ordinary users, and this fact in itself often lends an air of authenticity and reliability to fake or manipulated content. This process is further facilitated by the reputation of the current news environment, in which mass media are increasingly distrusted (Park *et al.* 2020; Eddy and Shearer 2025).

Through the manipulation of more or less reliable data and information, conspiracy theories and disinformation construct interpretations of facts and reality that frequently present themselves as critiques of the socio-discursive hegemony of dominant narratives, critiques that are grounded in specific political agendas. Indeed, disinformation

and conspiracy theories often present themselves as competing systems of beliefs: they construct social differences by providing the public sphere with an alternative epistemic framework, one that positions itself in opposition to the established, or supposedly legitimate socio-cultural hegemony of the "elite". This alternative framework is based on a view of society as dominated by ideological and moral polarization, whereby the "other" is discursively constructed in contrast to, and as conspiring against, the "people".

The legitimization of conspiratorial claims that come to be accepted as "true" occurs through specific discursive and communicative strategies which have been described as an epistemic masquerade (Demata 2025a, 2025b). Epistemic masquerade is constructed on the basis of three interrelated dimensions, each reflected in the discursive and linguistic structures of conspiracy texts. The first is their oppositional epistemology, a fundamental aspect of the ideological framework underpinning conspiracy theories, whereby such narratives position themselves in direct opposition to "official" or hegemonic ideologies. This oppositional stance frequently translates into the political sphere through the second dimension, the polarized logics of populism, which embed the epistemic masquerade of conspiratorial discourse within social and political praxis. This process unfolds primarily within the third dimension, a fragmented media landscape, typical of social media, which provides an ideal environment for conspiratorial actors to refract false claims as truth and cultivate an intensely polarized communicative and discursive space.

The forms of polarization constructed in conspiracy theories are a key feature of the online environment, but they also reflect the wider polarization taking place at multiple levels of society. It is commonly argued that social media create or at least intensify political polarization: communities of like-minded individuals, or echo chambers, tend to aggregate around shared political beliefs and interpretations of social reality and, as a consequence, reject their opponents' views, thus creating polarized groups that delegitimize one another and hold seemingly irreconcilable beliefs (Barberà 2020). This view has not gone unchallenged, as it has been claimed (e.g. Törnberg 2022) that a major driver of polarization is exposure to opposing or different political views on social media, rather than isolation within self-insulated echo chambers. Exposure to political content supporting opposing political positions actually increases political polarization, and in particular *affective* polarization (Iyengar *et al.* 2019; Törnberg 2022), whereby groups from opposite political denominations or ideologies come to dislike or even hate their opponents. Furthermore, this mutual dislike is not confined to the political sphere: through a process of sorting, group differences become increasingly salient and permeate all aspects of social life (Levendusky 2009). In this context, social media act as a catalyst for the interaction between divergent groups and, through this interaction, for the emergence and consolidation of polarized partisan positions (Rathje *et al.* 2021; van Bavel *et al.* 2021; Törnberg and Uitermark 2022).

The polarization that underpins epistemic masquerade in news discourse is produced through a range of discursive strategies, including visual ones, which tend to emphasize "othering", i.e. the construction in discourse of groups or individuals represented as dangerous to the people or to society. A recent example is the narrative of Haitian pet-eating migrants, which was mobilized as one of the key stories in the 2024 US presidential campaign.

3. The pet-eating Haitians

The rumours involving pet-eating migrants from Haiti were among the most extravagant, and at the same time among the most effective, claims made during the 2024 US presidential campaign. They do, however, also provide an excellent case study of how rumours can become accepted as "facts" by many: they are manufactured and/or manipulated on social media, relaunched through mass media, amplified by AI-generated images, and eventually find political expression in Trump's own campaign. In more than one sense, they constitute a paradigmatic example of how disinformation can be constructed in such a way as to align with some of the most polarizing issues for the US electorate, namely immigration, and they clearly carried racist overtones.

The seeds of the pet-eating narrative can be traced back to three separate events. The first one was a photograph shared on July 28 by a member of the r/Columbus subreddit, isitmeyourelooking4x. The image showed a black person walking in what was alleged to be Columbus, Ohio, carrying a dead goose, accompanied by the caption "Things you see while driving in CBUS" (Reddit 2024, n.p.). No information was provided about the man's identity or the circumstances of the incident nor was there any suggestion that he was an immigrant.

The second episode took place on August 16, when police in Canton, Ohio arrested an American woman, Allexis Telia Ferrell, accused of killing and eating a cat in front of her neighbours (Canton Police 2024). The incident attracted the attention of some local and national news outlets, such as Fox News (Landon 2024), but at the time it did not lead to any significant further developments. Finally, on August 27, during a public meeting of the local city commission, a resident of Springfield, Ohio, claimed that immigrants were killing ducks in city parks (Jingnan and Garsd 2024). The rumour was then echoed in a post on the Facebook group "Springfield, Ohio Crime Monitor" by another local resident, who claimed that, according to her neighbour's daughter's friend, her cat had disappeared at the hands of Haitian immigrants:

> Warning to all about our beloved pets and those around us!! My neighbor informed me that her daughter's friend had lost her cat. She checked pages, kennels, asked around, etc. One day she came home from work, as soon as she stepped out of her car, looked toward a neighbor's house, where Haitians live, and saw her cat hanging from a branch, like you'd do a deer for butchering and they were carving it up to eat. I've been told they are doing this to dogs, they have been doing it at Snyder Park with the ducks and geese. Please keep a close eye on these animals.

The Springfield resident later retracted her claim and deleted the post, while local officials also totally refuted the story (Reuters 2024). However, within a few days, Republican influencers and politicians had seized on the narrative and spread it far and wide. The X account @EndWokeness, formerly linked to white nationalist Jack Posobiec, shared a post claiming that Haitians were eating pets in Springfield (D'Angelo 2024). The story was then amplified by the late right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk through social media posts and media interviews. Kirk also declared that the incident brought the USA "one step closer to the great replacement", with reference to a well-known conspiracy theory alleging a plan to replace the native white population with immigrants (*ibid.*). The story subsequently received extensive coverage and became

one of the main talking points of the ongoing presidential campaign. Vice-Presidential candidate JD Vance repeatedly promoted the story on social media, especially on X, as well as in media interviews. Finally, an AI-generated image of Trump protecting a duck and a cat published by the X account of the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary gave rise to a flood of memes on social media portraying Trump defending pets and, conversely, Kamala and/or immigrants threatening them (King 2024). Eventually, Donald Trump repeated the bogus claim during the presidential debate with Kamala Harris on September 10 to the disbelief of many, and the approval of many others. The story was thoroughly debunked by all major news organizations, including the Associated Press (Catalini *et al.* 2024), Reuters (Reuters 2024), and the BBC (Thomas and Wendling 2024). The fact-checking website Snopes found no factual evidence whatsoever for the claim (Kasprak 2024), while another fact-checking outlet *PolitiFact* designated the story as the "lie of the year 2024" (Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024). Nevertheless, the story fitted neatly into Trump's own anti-immigration rhetoric, while it was condemned by the Biden administration as a conspiracy theory (Mangan and Rozzelle 2024). The countless memes portraying defenceless pets and ducks undoubtedly amplified the clamour surrounding the narrative and acted as a powerful discursive prompt against immigrants. As Vance himself put it, "The media didn't care about the carnage wrought by these policies until we turned it into a meme about cats" (D'Angelo 2024).

4. Dataset

The dataset selected for analysis comprises five posts originally published on X. These posts were not selected for numerical representativeness but through a process of purposive sampling grounded in external documentary evidence. More specifically, a comparative examination of summaries and fact-checking reports of the so-called pet-eating rumour published by major news outlets (Catalini *et al.* 2024*;* Kasprak 2024; Ramirez Uribe and Sherman 2024; Reuters 2024; Thomas and Wendling 2024) revealed that these five posts were among the most frequently cited and recirculated tweets in journalistic coverage of the narrative. Their selection therefore derives from an empirically observable pattern of intertextual recurrence rather than from deductive or speculative assumptions about their relevance. On this basis, the dataset is doubtless limited but analytically strategic: the tweets constitute high-visibility discursive nodes through which the rumour entered broader media circulation.

For the purpose of examining audience uptake and discursive reactions, the analysis also considers the twenty most visible comments posted in reply to each tweet at the time of data collection, for a total of one hundred comments. The selection of these comments does not rely on subjective assumptions about representativeness but follows the platform's own visibility logic, which determines which replies are displayed most prominently beneath a post. While the exact algorithmic mechanisms governing comment ordering are not fully transparent, available platform documentation indicates that replies are typically ranked according to a combination of engagement indicators, perceived relevance, and popularity metrics (Twitter 2023). The comments included in the dataset therefore correspond to those that the platform itself surfaces as the most

prominent contributions within the interactional thread. In this manner, the analysis captures forms of audience engagement that are algorithmically amplified within the platform environment.

(a) The tweet by the X account @EndWokeness, published on September 6, 2024, which first pushed the story nationwide. The post read:

Springfield is a small town in Ohio. 4 years ago, they had 60k residents. Under Harris and Biden, 20,000 Haitian immigrants were shipped to the town. Now ducks and pets are disappearing (https://x.com/EndWokeness/status/1832134984557113706).

Below the verbal segment, two screenshots are placed side by side: the post from the "Springfield, Ohio Crime Monitor" which falsely claimed that Haitians had stolen and eaten a cat, and the photograph from the subreddit, showing a black man walking in Columbus holding a goose[1]. In this post, the Springfield, Ohio narrative incorporates the unrelated episode in Columbus, thereby reinforcing the supposed evidence that migrants were killing and eating pets.

(b) The tweet by the late Republican commentator and influencer Charlie Kirk, published on September 8:

Residents of Springfield, OH are reporting that Haitians are eating their family pets, another gift of the Biden-Harris mass immigration replacement plan. Liberals will soon be lecturing Americans on why they need to be sensitive to Haitian culture and accept this as the new normal. Those idiots deserve to be condemned and mocked mercilessly. Save our pets. Secure our borders (https://x.com/charliekirk11/status/1832883283199471676).

The lower section of the post is made up of two images: a screenshot of an article from the right-wing online news outlet Breitbart with the headline "Biden Floods Ohio Town with 20,000 Haitian Migrants: Ten to a Bedroom" (Breitbart 2024), and, again, the screenshot of the deleted post by the Springfield resident.

(c) A tweet by JD Vance, published on September 9. The tweet includes a video in which Vance comments on the alleged strain placed on housing resources in Springfield by the arrival of large numbers of migrants. The written part of the tweet first summarizes the contents of the video, and then adds the "reports" about pet-eating incidents, referencing Kamala Harris, the "border czar":

Months ago, I raised the issue of Haitian illegal immigrants draining social services and generally causing chaos all over Springfield, Ohio.

Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country. Where is our border czar? (https://x.com/JDVance/status/1833148904864465117).

(d) The tweet by the official X account of the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary, @JudiciaryGOP, featuring an AI-generated image of Trump hugging a cat

[1] The author of the subreddit, isitmeyourelooking4x, later expressed their anger that their photo was being manipulated by right-wing influencers and politicians (Thalen 2024).

and a duck with the caption "Protect our ducks and kittens in Ohio!", published on September 9 (https://x.com/JudiciaryGOP/status/1833154509222129884?lang=en).

(e) A second tweet by Vance, published on September 10, in which he cites reports from Springfield residents, which are then followed by a summary of the Democrats' immigration policies and a link to a speech by Kamala Harris:

In the last several weeks, my office has received many inquiries from actual residents of Springfield who've said their neighbors' pets or local wildlife were abducted by Haitian migrants. It's possible, of course, that all of these rumors will turn out to be false.

Do you know what's confirmed? That a child was murdered by a Haitian migrant who had no right to be here. That local health services have been overwhelmed. That communicable diseases--like TB and HIV--have been on the rise. That local schools have struggled to keep up with newcomers who don't know English. That rents have risen so fast that many Springfield families can't afford to put a roof over their head.

Here is Kamala Harris bragging about giving amnesty to thousands of Haitian migrants (https://x.com/i/status/1833147988765478944).

If you're a reporter, or an activist, who didn't give a shit about these suffering Americans until yesterday, I have some advice: Spare your outrage for your fellow citizens suffering under Kamala Harris's policies. Be outraged at yourself for letting this happen (https://x.com/JDVance/status/1833505359513661762?lang=en).

As shown in Table 1, the levels of interaction between each of these posts and the X audience are extremely high. The House Judiciary tweet has the highest number of views (88 million), but the post with the highest number of retweets and likes is Vance's tweet (e), which also has the second-highest number of comments.

Tweet	Views	Comments	Retweets	Likes
(a)	5 mln	3304	19564	64978
(b)	4.1 mln	2755	11804	27356
(c)	11.5 mln	9906	29034	102367
(d)	88 mln	4410	9196	36686
(e)	16.2 mln	9581	30398	122018

Table 1. Number of interactions for the five tweets under analysis (Views, Comments, Retweets and Likes)

Comments referred to in the text are numbered according to their order of appearance when scrolling down the X feed under each tweet at the time of analysis (e.g. comment d4 is the fourth comment under tweet (d), as of 3 November 2025). Both the tweets and the comments were captured as screenshots and numbered on November 10, 2025. All comments analysed here have been anonymized.

5. Methodology

Building on the notion of epistemic masquerade discussed in section 2, both the tweets and the comments will be analysed in terms of the discursive strategies that express and foster polarization and contribute to the construction of alternative truths. The analysis will show how the deployment of similar strategies can lead to diametrically opposed evaluations. This, in turn, suggests that the legitimation of disinformation and conspiracy theories at the core of epistemic masquerade aims to construct alternative discourses that position themselves in opposition to those supported by official epistemic authorities. This occurs primarily through discursive strategies of legitimation that mimic those used by the legitimate discourses of the epistemic authorities.

Legitimation strategies have been theorized by van Leeuwen and Wodak (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), who argue that social actors draw on a limited set of recurrent strategies when they seek to justify or defend particular practices. In van Leeuwen's (2007) model there are four main types of legitimation: Authorization**,** where legitimacy is grounded in traditional, institutional or legal authority; Moral Evaluation**,** which appeals to shared values and moral discourses; Rationalization**,** which refers to the goals, functions and apparently "rational" motivations of institutionalized practices and to socially validated knowledge; and Mythopoesis, whereby legitimacy is constructed through narratives whose plots reward compliant behaviour and sanction deviance (van Leeuwen 2007; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). These resources are available across genres, but they assume particular prominence in political and news discourse, where texts have high social impact and persuasion is a central goal (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). Within this framework, Authorization is especially important, since it legitimizes a speaker's position by invoking other, ostensibly more authoritative voices. Van Leeuwen further differentiates Authorization into Personal Authority, Expert Authority, Role Model Authority, Impersonal Authority, and the Authority of Tradition (van Leeuwen 2007). Expert Authority and the Authority of Tradition are often linguistically instantiated through quotation, a form of intertextuality in which segments of other texts are imported into the current one. Such quotations can be strategically mobilized either to undermine and discredit the original source, or to endorse it and use it as an authoritative validation of what is being said. In both cases, quotation fulfils an epistemic function: it supplies the discourse with evidentiality, marking the basis of knowledge-claims and presenting them as grounded in facts, records or prior utterances (Bednarek 2006). In this study, strategies of authorization and moral legitimation are mobilized, while the other categories in van Leeuwen's typology, most notably mythopoesis and extended rationalization, are mostly absent. This distribution may well depend on the discursive and structural constraints of the platform: tweets function as highly compressed communicative units that favour concise assertions, evaluative cues, and appeals to authority rather than extended narrative or argumentative development. News reporting is characteristically constructed by weaving together heterogeneous materials such as video footage, interviews, official documents, and user-generated content from social media. This intertextual assemblage allows journalists publishing online to project credibility and objectivity not as properties of their own personal voice, but as qualities that derive from, and are validated by,

a range of external, institutionally or experientially authorized sources (Bednarek and Caple 2012: 90-94).

The tweets and comments in the dataset will be analysed with particular attention as to how the multimodal affordances of X are employed to construct meaning and evaluation in discourse and communicate these to other social media users. The verbal and visual features of the posts orient viewers/readers towards an interpretation grounded in multimodal intertextuality and legitimation, shaping how they are evaluated.

6. Analysis

6.1. *Tweets*

Tweets (a) and (b) engage directly with the supposed news of the pet-eating migrants. Their authors effectively construct the news by assembling separate and unrelated news items: (a) the "End Wokeness" tweet collates the photograph of a man walking in the streets of Columbus with the withdrawn tweet by the Springfield resident, while in (b) Kirk uses the withdrawn post again and places it alongside a Breitbart headline accusing Biden of opening the borders to immigrants. In both cases, events are legitimized through intertextuality and are constructed around sources that appear to confirm the veracity of the narrative. The screenshot of the Springfield resident's post functions as a quotation of purportedly direct evidence from a first-hand witness and, in itself, is used to validate the truth value of the reported facts. By invoking a local Voice of Authority, the post by a community member legitimizes the apparent tangibility of the claim about the pet-eating migrants. In tweet (a), the photograph of the black man walking with a goose in his hand is intended to provide further validation, functioning as purported photographic evidence for the claim. In tweet (b), a second intertextual chain is then added to validate the argument against immigration: the Breitbart report on 20,000 Haitian migrants arriving in Springfield as a result of Biden's policies provides a causality nexus between the despicable act of pet-eating and immigration.

In both cases, the combination of images and text suggests causality, as the visual materials lend an air of authenticity to the posts: immigrants eat pets, and they are here because of Biden.

Vance's two tweets, (c) and (e), articulate the connection between the pet-eating narrative and immigration policies in a more textually coherent and direct way, explicitly embedding it within his political programme. The strain on resources purportedly caused by Haitian migrants forms the ideological core of these posts and is in line with the typical Trumpian anti-immigration discourse, whereby migrants waste resources which could otherwise be allocated to public services. The pet-eating narrative serves to validate this position by providing further evidence of the morally alien nature of migrants. It is then legitimized by Vance's use of what (he claims) real people say, as "*Reports* now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country" and "my office has received many inquiries from *actual residents of Springfield* who've said their neighbors' pets or local wildlife were abducted by Haitian migrants" (my italics). Thus, these reported 'voices of the people' lend authenticity to the claim.

Tweet (d) from the Republican House Committee on the Judiciary links the pet-eating narrative directly to Trump himself, who is portrayed as protecting a duck and a

cat. Especially when viewed alongside the other four tweets, this image illustrates a simple fact: Trump is called upon to protect ducks and pets from immigrants. Although patently fabricated, the image invites an affective reading of Trump as a protective figure, shielding defenceless ducks and pets from evil Haitians.

6.2. *Comments*

The one hundred comments collected for this study engage with the topics raised by the tweets in recognizable patterns, offering a cross-section of the way polarization operates among social media users. While the overarching theme of the five tweets is the same (the pet-eating narrative), they inevitably offer different kinds of "prompts" for user responses, reflecting the differing authors and genres: JD Vance is an officially recognized politician and, at the time, the vice-presidential candidate; EndWokeness is an extreme right-wing fringe account, Charlie Kirk was a right-wing political activist and influencer, and the Republican House Judiciary account, which published the AI-generated image of Trump protecting a duck and a cat, is an official party-recognized page. Despite these differences, an overarching pattern emerges across the comments: users attacking the Haitian migrants endorse the pet-eating narrative and construct the social identity of Haitians (from a racial and/or national point of view) in stark, extreme terms primarily through Moral Evaluation.

a5. Import the third world become the third world
a8. Africans gonna African no matter what you call them
"Haitian"
"Caribbean"
"black"
a15. When you import the 3rd world.
Your ducks and natural animals disappear as well.
a18. This is some serious 3rd world BS! Thanks Kamala!
a20. Omgggg! This is some third-world craziness!
b3. We're becoming a 3rd world country quickly.
b14. Import the third world and you import its problems. Who'd have thought we'd have a problem of people hunting, killing and eating tame ducks and geese in our public parks. While also stealing, killing and eating people's pets in the U.S.

The tweet by the Republican House Judiciary portraying Trump saving a duck and a cat gave rise to a series of AI-generated memes, posted as part of users' comments which make the strategy of othering underpinning the pet-eating narrative even more explicit. In some of these memes (e.g. see Figure 1, comment d18), Trump is depicted holding pets and running away from black people who are shown pursuing him in order to get at the animals. These memes reproduce a centuries-old stereotype of the savage and uncivilized black African, clad in tribal attire and threatening the white man.

Both verbal comments and AI-generated images construct a discursive polarization between the USA and Haitian migrants, grounded in their representation as belonging to the "third world", as if this label in itself accounted for their purportedly degraded nature. The stigma attached to Haitians, portrayed as pet-eating monsters, operates



Figure 1. Screenshot of comment d18

within a cultural context in which pets almost naturally elicit emotions of tenderness and familiarity. Indeed, a majority of Americans not only consider pets as family members but often treat them as *human* members of the family (Brown 2023), so the claim that they have become part of the Haitians' diet is construed as akin to cannibalism. Two comments explicitly suggest that, given the supposedly evil nature of Haitians, the abduction of pets will be followed by the abduction of children:

a10. Oh no. Next children will go missing. Deport them all on day 1 of Trumps presidency.

a11. Soon it won't just be ducks and pets disappearing, eventually it will be children. Who is to blame when that happens?



Figure 2. Screenshot of comment d10

At least one comment explicitly invokes the ostensibly cannibalistic nature of Haitians:

b6. It has to be said that there were reports of Haitians eating humans in Haiti. How do we know if any of the people Biden-Harris brought in are involved with that?

In many respects, this pattern reproduces stereotypical representations of Haitians as adherents of voodoo cults engaged in human sacrifice, hence their Moral Evaluation as inherently evil in opposition to the ostensibly positive and "good" values associated with US citizens. Both the AI-generated images and the accusations of cruelty and cannibalism directed at Haitians participate in a long-standing dehumanizing trope that has historically served to justify racism (Loichot 2024). An AI-generated image of Haitian street food further accentuates this trope (Figure 2, comment d10).

The third-world label is further expounded in several comments that assert the supposed civilizational superiority of the United States over non-Americans:

b8. Diversity is not our strength. Some cultures should not mix.

c17. Haitians are uncivilized and need to be deported

d13. We need MASS DEPORTATION of these savages now

e16. Save our PETS from ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS who want to eat them. Foreign Cultures have different standards.

We love our PETS. Send the Foreign Culture home!

Three of the above comments resound with two key tropes of Trump's campaign discourse: the notion of "illegal immigrants", the most recurrent collocation of "immigrant" in Trump's rhetoric (Demata 2022), and the much-touted project of mass deportation. The Haitian narrative, therefore, aligns with a frame that resonates strongly with Trump supporters, as it appears to provide 'evidence' underpinning their negative evaluation of immigrants.

The dehumanization of migrants emerges explicitly in a number of comments. The recurrent notion of "importing" migrants constructs them as movable goods, implying their commodification. Comment e9 recalls Trump's notorious statement that he would close the borders to people coming from "shithole countries".

b9. Kamala Harris has imported the third world.

We need Trump to deport the third world

b13. Biden/Harris are still importing Haitians through the CHNV program. It needs to stop

e9. Trump was right.

Haiti is a shithole.

We are importing their worst.

SAVE THE CHILDREN AND THE PETS!

The pet-eating narrative feeds into a widespread perception among Trump supporters that Democrats are in favour of uncontrolled immigration (they "imported" Haitians) and are therefore responsible for the crime commonly attributed to migrants. This is further integrated into a familiar Republican stereotype that casts Democrats as Marxists:

e15. The damage done by Kamala's policies are so large they hard to calculate. Cultural Marxism is a cancer.

Hence, the process of "othering" Haitians is reinforced by the identification of Kamala Harris with Communism. Anti-communism has long been an integral part of right-wing US discourse, and the stigmatization of liberals has traditionally proceeded through accusations of communism.

Some comments seek to confirm the veracity of the narrative either based on personal testimony, with some users claiming to live very close to where the alleged pet-eating incidents occurred and to be first-hand witnesses:

a9. I live close by. This is absolutely true

b18. Can confirm. This is about 25 mins from where I live. It's truly disgusting what is happening and the stories I've been hearing.

e10. It's happening here in Washington Indiana as well.

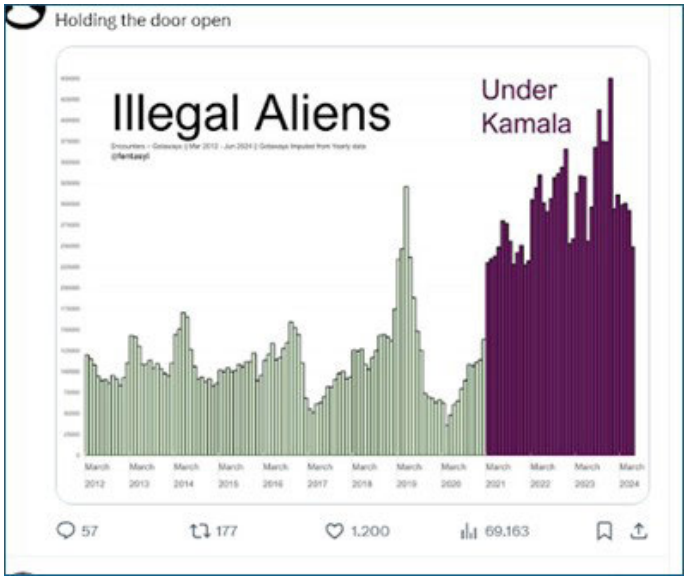

Figure 3. Screenshot of comment c4



Figure 4. Screenshot of comment c12



Figure 5. Screenshot of comment e14

Others rely on Authorization, invoking official statistics that allegedly confirm a rise in the number of migrants entering the USA, again subsuming the Haitian narrative into the more general issue of immigration (see Figure 3, comment c4).

Conversely, opposition to the narrative (and to Trump himself) is articulated primarily by challenging its epistemic basis, notably through references to the various fact-checking and debunking efforts to which the narrative has been subjected.

c1. This has been debunked but of course you're spreading fake news. You're desperate and sad.

e4. You're such a lying grifter. Nobody said their pets have been abducted according to the police. Pathetic.

Some users employ the legitimation strategy of Authorization, posting references to official reports or news websites. Comments c12 and e14 (Figures 4 and 5), for instance, include links to articles from the Springfield News-Sun and NBC News respectively, in which local police authorities state that there have been no reported pet-eating incidents in Springfield or elsewhere in Ohio. Other comments counter the narrative by simply calling Vance a liar, thus relying on Moral Evaluation:

c4. this is a lie. you are a liar, and a bad one at that.

Clearly, then, opposition to the narrative relies both on recourse to the authority of reliable sources and on the moral evaluation of the pet-eating narrative and those who support it by lying.

7. Discussion

The narrative about Haitian migrants abducting and eating pets from American homes is a blatant example of how news can be manipulated to achieve specific political aims. The pet claim gradually evolved from unfounded or exaggerated rumours into a political news item: it moved from scattered allegations, comments and photographs on community social media pages to a single, consolidated narrative circulating through mass media and presidential debates. This evolution unfolded in an environment in which the boundary between reliable information and disinformation or conspiracy theories is far from self-evident. Indeed, quite the opposite occurs: disinformation and conspiracy theories can pass as true and reliable information because they draw on legitimation strategies that are routinely employed in the discursive construction of legitimate news. Both believers and sceptics of the pet-eating narrative justify their claims through two main dimensions of legitimation: 1) Authorization: for supporters, evidential claims are provided by direct testimonies and statistics; for detractors, by news reports and debunking evidence. 2) Moral Evaluation, whereby Trump supporters treat the pet-eating narrative as emblematic of the immoral nature of Haitians (and, by extension, of all immigrants), while Trump's detractors emphasize that the narrative is grounded in lies. For Trump supporters, the pet-eating claim is either accepted at face value or legitimized through Authorization, that is, through reliable or pseudo-reliable sources drawn from both news media and ordinary citizens, some of whom confirm the narrative through their own allegedly first-hand testimony, thus producing a constructed and manipulated intertextuality in which selected sources of authority are presented as validating. The apparent veracity of the pet-eating account is therefore constructed from "below", through supposedly first-hand accounts and images shared by social media users, and it follows the pattern of epistemic masquerade typical of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Moreover, the Moral Evaluation underpinning the narrative reinforces group polarization on two levels: it others Haitians, who are discursively constructed as pet-eaters in opposition to US citizens, whose behaviour and moral values are represented as fundamentally different, while also dividing those who endorse the narrative from those who reject it. First of all, the tweets and their comments emphasize a supposed civilizational gap between the USA and the "third world" and the alien nature of Haitians, discursively constructed as "other" to US citizens in ethnic, cultural and moral terms. Polarization centres on the core assumption of the pet-eating affair: the implicit idea that the moral values of Haitian migrants are so low that they abduct pets from their rightful (American) owners in order to kill and eat them. In US culture, pets are widely regarded as family members, and harming them is perceived as inhuman. Moreover, the popularity of comments highlighting the supposed immorality of pet-eating Haitians, including memes portraying Trump saving cats from the fury of wild black people, aligns with previous research on the dynamics

of online dissemination. More specifically, studies have found that tweets containing false rumours and morally-charged emotional content tend to spread more quickly and more extensively than tweets conveying truthful information (Brady *et al.* 2017, 2019; Vosoughi *et al.* 2018).

The othering of Haitian migrants follows in the footsteps of wider racist tropes that depict people from the third world as uncivilized and inferior and, in the specific case of Haitians, as inclined towards cannibalism. Indeed, the "other" constructed by the pet-eating narrative is portrayed as threatening not just pets, but the supposedly pure identity of US citizens. The insistence on the evil nature of Haitians and on their labelling as morally deviant others resonated strongly with segments of the electorate hostile to immigrants and in favour of the "Trump Wall" and other restrictive measures, including deportation. Comments supporting the pet-eating narrative cluster at one end of the political spectrum. For these users, the narrative becomes an additional strand (and further confirmation) of their strongly held beliefs in the superiority of the USA and the ethnic and cultural inferiority of those "others" whose ways of life allegedly diverge completely from civilization. This constructed inferiority reinforces a nativist and nationalistic ideological framework, in which the nation's uniqueness and exclusivity are defined against those positioned outside it and beyond its moral and social norms. In this context, pet-eating Haitians function as a shorthand for immigrants and immigration more generally, as well as for the problems these are said to bring to the USA. Crucially, the narrative also becomes a powerful catalyst for the construction of group identity, of a nationalist and nativist "us", endowed with civilization and positive virtues, as opposed to a malign "other", a "them", located in a "third world", outside the compass of civilization and represented as needing to be contained or deported.

The tweets and their comments also fuel polarization at another level, namely between those who support the pet-eating narrative and express anger at its alleged claims, and those who vehemently deny it. Posts of this kind are almost bound to provoke controversy and attract angry reactions. This dynamic is common on social media for at least two reasons: 1) morally or politically divisive messages generally tend to attract higher levels of user engagement, and 2) when news about a particular group circulates, it tends to be commented upon not only by supporters but also, and often especially, by those who oppose that group.

Indeed, posts such as those related to pet-eating Haitians can lead people with opposing viewpoints to become even more polarized in their opinions (Rathje *et al.* 2021). In this environment, pro- and anti-Trump groups construct competing versions of events on the basis of two opposing epistemic spheres, each claiming the authority of "facts", while drawing on very different forms of moral leverage.

8. Conclusions

The whole pet-eating conspiracy is based on, and reinforces, highly polarized opinions, which denote two totally opposite epistemic stances, or two competing forms of knowledge based on mutually incompatible truth claims. The analysis revealed that the five seed tweets primarily mobilize strategies of authorization and moral legitimation, while other categories in van Leeuwen's typology, most notably mythopoesis and, to a lesser extent, extended rationalization, are mostly absent. This distribution may well

depend on the discursive and structural constraints of the platform: tweets function as highly compressed communicative units that favour concise assertions, evaluative cues, and appeals to authority rather than extended narrative or argumentative development. What clearly emerges from the analysis is that, whether the narrative is endorsed through supposedly first-hand accounts of the same or similar incidents or rejected through equally forceful debunking, the dominant communicative and discursive pattern remains one of polarization. Indeed, the pet-eating conspiracy theory is paradigmatic of the way in which a false or exaggerated claim can be manipulated and circulated via social media, thereby gaining legitimacy through the act of sharing itself, before being further amplified by political campaigning and feeding into an already highly polarized political environment. Originating in a Facebook post by a resident of Springfield, Ohio, which was later retracted, and subsequently reinforced by the attachment of other vaguely similar rumours or incidents, the narrative was rendered credible and 'real' through repeated sharing and reposting, and was ultimately weaponized by the Republican Party and the Trump campaign. The trajectory of the narrative provides further evidence that nowadays social media can play a key role not only in setting the political agenda but also in constructing narratives that may influence, or even shape, public opinion. In turn, social media act as a catalyst for the polarization of public opinion on political issues, functioning as a battlefield in which different, irreconcilable worldviews are enacted through ideological division.

The pet-eating narrative is either affirmed or rejected on the basis of two opposing moral evaluations: Trump supporters accept it on the assumption that third-world migrants are morally corrupt, while Trump opponents reject it from a moral standpoint that treats lying as the epitome of political immorality. More broadly, the analysis suggests that online discourse continues to serve as a means of legitimizing the marginalization of certain minority groups through the manipulation of information about them and the ensuing polarization of opinions.

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SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE ON DIGITIZED GENDER VIOLENCE: ITALY'S *PHICA.EU* SCANDAL

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Abstract

Social media have revolutionized many aspects of society, from political mobilization to cultural expression. In recent years, these platforms have become critical arenas for debating gender-based violence, enabling victims to share their experiences and challenge established norms. At the same time, digital spaces have opened up counter-public forums, which, on the one hand, help survivors to denounce and find support, and, on the other, have inadvertently facilitated new forms of control or abuse as highlighted by the recent Italian sexist scandal concerning the *Phica.eu* platform. This article provides a sentiment analysis of posts uploaded to Facebook, X and Instagram, about the *Phica.eu* scandal that reveals how social media platforms frame discourses surrounding this scandal and how they shape and open up a debate on online gender violence.

1. Introduction

The case of *Phica.eu* exploded in Italy in the last week of August 2025. *Phica.eu* was a social forum used by thousands of people who shared original and doctored photos of women (taken from their social media profiles) that were accompanied by offensive, vulgar and sexist comments. The platform was created in 2005 and for years remained largely unknown and tolerated as student pranks by those registered on it. This changed dramatically between August 25 and 29 2025 when women in politics, such as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and the opposition leader, Elly Schlein, publicly denounced the presence of their pictures on the platform (Rainsford 2025; De Michele 2025). From that moment on, political and social outrage flared up on both traditional and social media, supported by numerous Italian MPs, while victims reported it to the Italian Postal Police, the investigative authority in charge of cybercrimes. The protest was so strong that *Phica.eu* administrators deleted some of the most compromising pictures and eventually shut the platform down completely (De Michele 2025; Rainsford 2025; Reuters 2025; ANSA 2025). The scandal rapidly escalated into an emblematic case of digital violence and online sexism, opening up a debate about victim protection, platform responsibility and the need to educate people to be respectful in digital contexts.

This quanti-qualitative study explores how the *Phica.eu* scandal is discursively framed on social media platforms, with a particular focus on Facebook, X and Instagram. Using the open source software CorpusSense (Moreno-Ortiz 2025), a sentiment analysis of more than 400 comments uploaded to these social media platforms was carried out. The aim was to understand, in the relationship between social media and the open debate, how digital discourses frame the *Phica.eu* scandal and the extent to which they shape the open debate on online gender violence. For this purpose, the paper is organized as follows: after the literature review in Section 2, and the methodological approach in Section 3, data analysis and discussion are offered in Section 4, after which some concluding remarks follow.

2. Literature review

Social media platforms have altered the dynamics of public discourse. Their ability to invite participation from diverse demographic groups offers unprecedented opportunities for marginalized groups to articulate their experiences in their own words. For instance, in the case of gender violence victims, social media facilitate the sharing of personal narratives and the challenging of pervasive stereotypes (Maci 2022), institutional biases and patriarchal narratives embedded in conventional media structures (Maci 2026). At the same time, growing evidence shows that social media spaces often serve as sites of gender violence, giving way to the creation of masculinity forums that espouse antifeminist interpretations of contemporary social issues (McGlashan 2023), some of them simply hate-filled and resentment-fuelled with quite chilling levels of misogyny (Nagle 2018; Spallaccia 2020). Routine harassment, trolling and sustained abuse, targeting women and other marginalized groups in particular, have become well-documented phenomena (Cameron 2024; Maci 2024, 2026). This "online 'manosphere' – a loose online network of anti-feminist radical forums and websites dedicated to issues relating to men and masculinity" (McGlashan and Krendel 2024: 87) undermines the transformative potential of online support and a counter-public space for resisting gender violence, by paradoxically becoming a site for both empowerment and victimization. This dichotomy stresses issues of:

- polarization vs participation: while social platforms offer democratic access to dialogue, they increasingly foster echo chambers, harassment and selective participation (Maci *et al.* 2024);
- marginalized voices and silencing: while social media offer marginalized groups sites to make their voices heard, abuse, trolling and platform bias silence them (*ibid.*).

Social media are inherently ambivalent. They facilitate connections, knowledge-sharing and community mobilization, yet, at the same time, they exacerbate patriarchal control in online spaces (Maci 2024; Greer *et al.* 2025), magnifying power imbalances (Bachmann *et al.* 2025).

In Italy, public opinion about gender-based violence is moulded by the traditional and digital media, which create and maintain stereotypes and social standards. Discussions about male blame are often marginalized through de-responsibilization strategies (Anouna 2020), with male perpetrators portrayed through the lens of romanticized emotions in narratives that prioritize sensationalism over the systemic analysis of gender violence (Belmonte and Negri 2021). In addition to hiding the underlying gender

dynamics, such biased reporting reinforces perceptions that portray gender violence as an isolated, sporadic problem, rather than a structural social issue, which thus normalizes abuse and discourages awareness of gender violence as a structural problem, leaving a distorted understanding of its dynamics (*ibid.* 2021; Saccà 2024).

Against this backdrop, Italian social media, such as Facebook and X, have become a public, heated arena for contesting the narratives surrounding gender violence often revealing the dual nature of digital engagement: while providing a space for solidarity and collective action (D'Ambrosi and Polci 2017; D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2018), they also reveal deep-seated prejudices and misogynistic attitudes that continue to pervade online discourse (Anouna 2020). Longstanding traditions, coupled with a media system that often reinforces patriarchal values, complicate efforts to achieve substantial change in Italy. The *Phica.eu* scandal is emblematic.

Scholarship in digital discourse analysis has emphasized how platform architectures shape not just what is said, but how discourse unfolds through specific affordances (Gibson 1979; Norman 1988; Bucher and Helmond 2018). Facebook's threaded comments enable protracted argumentation; Instagram's visuality privileges affective solidarity; X's brevity favours viral provocation (Papacharissi 2015; Highfield and Leaver 2016). These technological constraints become discursive opportunities that either amplify or silence particular framings of gender violence, warranting platform-specific analysis rather than generic "social media" treatments.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the theoretical lens for unpacking these dynamics (Fairclough 2014; Maci and Sala 2022). CDA reveals how linguistic choices – from minimizing rhetoric ("just banter") to whataboutism – reproduce power asymmetries online, while sentiment analysis (via tools like CorpusSense: Moreno-Ortiz 2025) quantifies their prevalence across platforms. Applied to the *Phica.eu* case, this mixed-methods approach illuminates how Italian digital publics negotiate between feminist counter-publics (Fraser 1990) and entrenched misogynistic echo chambers, directly addressing RQ1:

RQ1: What role do social media platforms play in elaborating discourse frames surrounding the *Phica.eu* scandal and in shaping the open debate on online gender violence?

3. Methodological approach

This corpus-driven (Hunston 2002) study draws on digital discourse analysis (Maci and Sala 2022) combined with CDA (Fairclough 2014). I believe this mixed approach provides a principled method for exploring discourse in open debates about gender and online gender violence on social media.

To carry out this examination, I first read all Italian and English digital newspaper articles available in the week of 25–31 August 2025 about the *Phica.eu* scandal to gain some context. I then explored how the news was reported or commented on, on social media platforms, by victims and platform users to investigate the role social media play in framing the discourse around the *Phica.eu* scandal. To this end, I considered three social media platforms: Facebook (FB), Instagram (IG) and X. The Italian Government's *Annual Report on Information* (AgCom 2025) shows that 52.4% of Italians

find information on social media, with the following demographic: FB, IG, Telegram and X are mainly used by millennials and Gen X, while TikTok and YouTube are preferred by Gen Z (AGI-Agenzia Italia 2023). As the former group is more interested in news interactions (likes, comments), and the latter in influencers and videos (uploading pictures and selfies), and given that the investigation was primarily focused on social media posts containing reactions to and comments about the *Phica.eu* scandal, FB, IG and X were considered for the investigation. Telegram was not taken into consideration because it does not normally offer space for proper open debate, as it is a semi-closed platform based on channels, group chats and private messages. Moreover, in the specific case of *Phica.eu*, there is no evidence that Telegram channels played a central role in shaping the open debate, which primarily unfolded on the three mainstream platforms considered here.

As FB, IG and X policies do not allow scraping posts using APIs, I decided to proceed manually and find all the posts on those three platforms dealing with the *Phica.eu* scandal by using the hashtag #*phica*. I began my analysis on Instagram, as this was the platform where the case first gained public visibility: Ms Alessandra Moretti, a Member of the European Parliament, publicly reported the *Phica.eu* platform on IG, triggering the initial wave of reactions. Starting from this discursive point of origin allowed me to reconstruct the early circulation of the hashtag and related comments. My manual search on IG retrieved 92 posts containing #phica; however, only 18 posts with comments discussing the *Phica.eu* case were found, which were, therefore, downloaded and saved[1]. To ensure reliability and representativeness, I followed the same procedure for both FB and X and used 18 posts as a cutoff point. I then downloaded all the comments contained in the first 18 posts found with the #*phica* search dealing with the scandal. I managed to collect 54 posts with a total of 427 comments, forming a small corpus of 23,131 words, as shown in Table 1.

Social media platform	Post #	Comment #	Word #	Token #
FB	18	244	10,998	11,796
IG	18	92	9,103	9,786
X	18	91	3,030	3,584
TOTAL	*54*	*427*	*23,131*	*25,166*

Table 1. Corpus breakdown

The analysis will not be *across* corpora but *within* corpora. This means that differences in size are not relevant for the purposes of this investigation. When needing to

[1] The downloaded posts have been saved and archived with all sensitive details deleted to ensure privacy. For this reason, posts needed as examples are (partially) cited with no indication of the author. Examples are identified indicating the relevant social media company (e.g. FB for Facebook, IG for Instagram, and X for X), followed by a number representing the chronological order of post downloading (as in FB1, FB2, I3, X4) with the order of the comment appearing under the post (as in FB1-3, FB18-1 etc.).

compare results across the three different subcorpora, standardization will be given with reference to percentages.

The gender of the post authors was not always identifiable, as many use a nickname. However, whenever possible, gender classification was taken into consideration.

CorpusSense is an open-access program used for corpus query and analysis, it is designed for the exploration of large language data sets through a combination of statistical and linguistic techniques using Python (Moreno-Ortiz 2024). The range of functionalities offered by CorpusSense facilitates both quantitative and qualitative textual analysis, including the generation of frequency lists, keyword extraction, collocations, colligations and semantic analysis (available at: https://corpus-sense.uma.es/).

This step facilitated a CDA-informed analysis, assessing how comments on the three social platforms construct meaning and critique. This approach made it possible to identify specific discursive patterns in all three corpora.

4. Data analysis and discussion

4.1. *Data analysis*

4.1.1. *Facebook*

CorpusSense semantic analysis revealed that the main theme of the collected corpus is focused on the topic of digital violence and issues linked to social media.

The theme extends to include discussions about:

- online abuse;
- privacy issues;
- personal data protection and violation;
- negative attitudes towards women, in particular; and
- references to specific events such as the closure of controversial sites and arguments centring around legal responsibility in digital crimes.

The prevailing sentiment is negative and can be elaborated by women against men as in (1):

(1) Sei parte del problema [you are part of the problem] (FB3-1)

by men against women who ironically comment on the fact that women judge all men on the basis of some other men's actions as in (2):

(2) La cosa più brutta è che non si può giudicare un gruppo dalle azioni di pochi [the worst thing is that you cannot judge a group by the actions of a few] (FB 3-32)

or even by men and a few women against the post authors, especially if they are journalists:

(3) Il problema è chi lo paga per scrivere [the problem is who pays them to write] (FB3-91)

A manual reading made it possible to group posts in discursive categories, which can be seen in Table 2, below:

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	60	24	25	*30*	5	Bisogna pubblicare i nomi delle persone coinvolte come si fa per altre indagini. È l'unico modo [The names of those involved must be published, as is done in other investigations. It is the only way.] (FB10-10)
Minimization/ justification	41	16	37	*3*	1	Outrage? They should be flattered… (FB1-2)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	53	21	47	*3*	3	Un po' ritardatine ste femmine [a bit slow these 'ere females] (FB2-1)
Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	36	14	29	*6*	1	Qua l'unico problema è che XXX pensa ancora di essere un giornalista [The only problem here is that XXX still thinks he's a journalist] (FB3-129)
Whataboutism	29	11	25	*2*	2	O ma questo però mai una parola sullo stupratore di Milano [Oh, but not a word about the rapist in Milan.] (FB3-130)
Male self-criticism	25	10	22	*0*	3	Gli uomini hanno causato quei problemi, la riflessione deve partire da noi [Men caused those problems, so we must be the ones to start reflecting on them] (FB4-1)

Table 2. Breakdown of semantic categories in FB posts

FB comments on *Phica.eu* posts are grouped in Table 2 into the following categories: *solidarity/indignation; minimizing/justification; misogynistic/hostile comments; political/media/police delegitimization or criticism; whataboutism;* and *male self-criticism*. Their incidence is as follows: *solidarity/indignation* (24%, 1st row), *misogynistic/hostile* attitude (21%, 3rd row) and *minimization* comments (16%, 2nd row). When *delegitimization of the media* is present (14%, 4th row), it is normally linked to *whataboutism*. All other comments have an almost even distribution among the semantic categories thus detected, with a decrease to about 10–11% of *whataboutism* and *male self-criticism* (5th and 6th rows). While all the categories include comments written by men, the *solidarity/indignation* category is equally authored by both men and women.

4.1.2. *Instagram*

A semantic analysis of the IG subcorpus shows that the main themes dealt with are:

- digital violence;
- online legal rights; and
- social dynamics and abusive practices on social networks.

The topics dealt with are centred around personal experiences, complaints and analyses of legal norms relating to digital violence. The sentiment is predominantly negative, with a strongly critical and indignant tone, usually found in women's comments:

(4) Non è uno scherzo, non è 'goliardia': è un reato [This is not a joke, it is not 'student pranking': it is a crime] (I3-1)

(5) Sarei curiosa di sapere come reagirebbero questi 720mila, che affermano fosse 'solo per scherzo' 'solo battute' 'che sarà mai', se i loro piselli finissero sul web tra i commenti di 720mila donne. Posso anticipargli che non sarebbero in elogio alla loro virilità [I would be curious to know how these 720,000 men, who claim it was 'just a joke', 'just banter', 'no big deal', would react if their willies ended up on the internet among the comments of 720,000 women. I can tell them in advance that it would not be in praise of their virility] (I1-9)

A manual reading of all posts and comments allowed us to semantically group comments into the categories shown in Table 3, below:

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	28	20	3	*22*	3	Disgusto e rabbia. Ma chi abbiamo in casa?! [Disgust and anger. Who on earth do we have in our house?!] (IG3-3)
Minimization/ justification	12	13	7	*1*	4	Sono solo 3 scemi che commentano Diletta Leotta 😂 [They're just three idiots commenting on Diletta Leotta 😂] (IG2-3)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	8	9	7	*0*	1	Una donna si fa foto da troia e poi si lamenta [A woman takes slutty photos of herself and then complains] (IG13-9)
Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	15	16	4	*6*	5	La postale lo sapeva da 20 anni e non ha fatto nulla. [The cybercrime police knew about it for 20 years and did nothing] (IG16-11)

Whataboutism	9	10	7	*1*	1	ma perché non parlate dei centinaia di casi al mese di immigrati che st%%prano ragazze nel nord italia [But why don't you talk about the hundreds of cases every month of immigrants r%%%ing girls in northern Italy?] (IG13-9)
Feminist structural analysis / activism	6	7	1	*4*	1	Siamo talmente immersi da centinaia di anni nella cultura maschilista e patriarcale da non accorgerci quanto condizioni i nostri comportamenti [We have been so immersed in a male-dominated and patriarchal culture for hundreds of years that we do not realize how much it conditions our behaviour] (IG4-4)
Political/ feminist complaints	14	15	0	*11*	3	Io denuncio. Basta anonimato sul web [I'm reporting it. No more anonymity on the web]. (IG7-1)

Table 3. Breakdown of semantic categories in IG posts

IG comments on *Phica.eu* posts can be grouped in exactly the same categories as the FB comments, with the exception of *male self-criticism*, replaced instead by a *feminist structural analysis* category. Unlike FB, IG comments are characterized more by *solidarity/ indignation* attitudes (20%, 1st row), followed by an almost equal incidence of *political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism* (16%, 4th row) and *political/ feminist complaints* (15%, last row). However, when the *political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism* category is present, it invariably criticizes the position taken up by these institutions. Furthermore, the extra category identified as *political/ feminist complaints,* mainly authored by women, reveals women's proactivity in relation to the scandal whereas *misogynist* feelings, *minimization* and *whataboutism* are mainly written by men.

4.1.3. *X*

The main themes associated with X comments seem to be linked to:

- social and political discussions in Italy;
- feminine oppression;
- gender violence; and
- power dynamics.

The subcorpus contains elements that refer to online groups and movements, with heavy criticism of public figures and institutions. Overall, the sentiment is predominantly negative, with a strongly critical and indignant tone, usually found in women's comments, as in excerpt (6):

(6) Se posti le foto di tua figlia non sei uno che ha sbagliato, sei probabilmente un malato da curare [If you post photos of your daughter, you are not someone who has made a mistake; you are probably someone who needs treatment.] (X4-8)

but also a critical one found in men's comments against women or institutions complaining about online gender violence:

(7) È piuttosto ridicolo da parte loro mettersi a fare la morale ora [it's rather ridiculous of them to start preaching now] (X4-6)

A manual reading of all posts and comments made it possible to semantically group comments into the categories shown in Table 4.

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	28	31	12	*12*	4	Lo trovo terribile ma, purtroppo, non mi sorprende. Quello che trovo ancora più terribile e che continuiamo a non essere credute, che servono cose come questa perché venga riconosciuta l'esistenza del problema [I find it terrible, but unfortunately, it doesn't surprise me. What I find even more terrible is that we continue to not be believed, that things like this are necessary for the existence of the problem to be recognized] (X7-3)
Minimization/ justification	13	14	9	*0*	4	Ripostare foto già pubblicate non è reato, però [Reposting previously published photos is not a crime, however] (X4-6)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	15	16	12	*0*	3	Quelle 4 troie che vedo tutti i giorni sui social [Those four sluts I see every day on social media] (X1-6)

→

Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	9	9.9	7	*1*	1	Mediaset ha prodotto le tettone di Drive In, le lolite di Non è la Rai, le veline, le letterine eccetera eccetera per decine di anni, istigando generazioni di donne allo zoccolismo e di uomini al segaiolismo. [Mediaset has produced the busty girls of Drive In, the Lolitas of Non è la Rai, the showgirls, the letter girls, etc., etc., for decades, inciting generations of women to promiscuity and men to masturbation.] (X1-4)
Whataboutism	8	8.8	6	*0*	2	Mentre l'intera 🇮🇹 (Parlamento femminile compreso) discute, indignata, di #Phica, vi segnalo che, in 20 mesi (ovvero, dal 1 gennaio 2024 ad oggi), su un totale di 168 attacchi ransomware condotti verso aziende, organizzazioni pubbliche amministrazioni, strutture sanitarie, etc., i gruppi criminali attaccanti hanno pubblicato la modica quantità di ben circa 51 TB di dati personali e sensibili di cittadini, società, etc. italiani. [While the entire 🇮🇹 Parliament (including the Women's Parliament) is indignantly discussing #Phica, I would like to point out that, in 20 months (i.e. from 1 January 2024 to today), out of a total of 168 ransomware attacks carried out against companies, public organisations, public administrations, healthcare facilities etc., the attacking criminal groups have published a modest amount of approximately 51 TB of personal and sensitive data belonging to Italian citizens, companies, etc.] (X4-14)
Feminist structural analysis / activism	9	9.9	0	*7*	2	Il caso di Phica racconta che nel nostro paese il patriarcato è sistemico [The Phica case shows that patriarchy is systemic in our country.] (X7-1)
Conspiracy theories / negationism	9	9.9	5	*0*	4	Quelli che hanno postato su Phica non esistono. Sono tutte storie inventate [Those who posted on Phica do not exist. They are all made-up stories.] (X6-2)

Table 4. Breakdown of semantic categories in X posts

Posts in the X subcorpus mostly correspond to those for the FB and Instagram subcorpora, except for the absence of the *male self-criticism* or *political/feminist complaints* categories. Unlike FB and IG, comments include those labelled as *conspiracy theories/ negationism*. As Table 4 shows, men dominate in *misogynistic* (16%, 3rd row), *minimizing* (14%, 2nd row) and *whataboutism* (8.8%, 5th row) comments. Women focus on *feminist analysis*. Both men and women, however, place emphasis on *solidarity/ indignation* (31%, 1st row), the top-ranking comments. Unidentifiable profiles appear mainly in short, ironic or conspiracy-theory tweets (9.9%, last row).

4.2. Discussion

The distribution of semantic categories across gender and across social platforms reveals the following insights. Figure 1 is a bar chart showing the distribution of the semantic categories across gender. When the overall distribution of the 427 comments is viewed as gender percentages (265 men, 109 women, 53 Non Identified people [N/I]), the stance adopted in comments by women is shown to equate with solidarity or indignation (14.9%), whereas men's comments, instead, focus on misogyny (15.4%), minimizing the scandal (12.4%), whataboutism (8.8%) and institutional (political, media or police) delegitimization (9.3%).

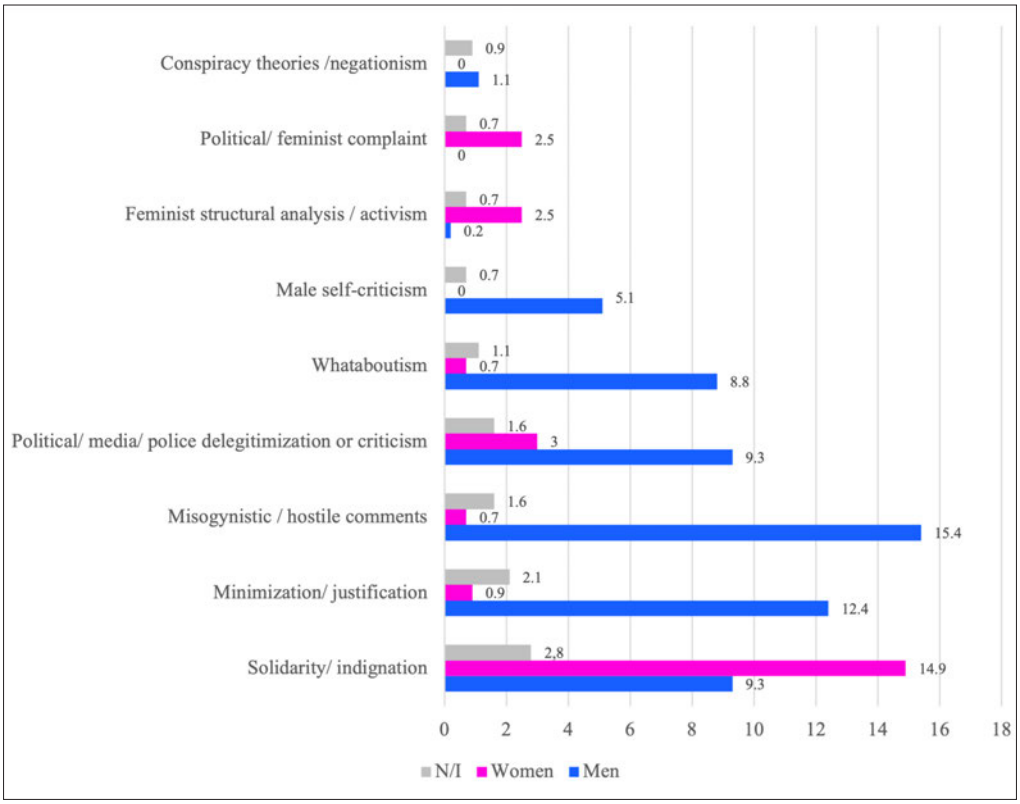

Figure 1. Semantic categories across genders (%)

The trend emerging from comment analysis confirms gender asymmetry typical of an as yet heavily patriarchal context such as the Italian one (Aloè *et al.* 2025). The strong male incidence in categories linked to *delegitimization*, *minimization*, *misogynist attacks* and *whataboutism* strategies mirrors what several studies have identified as the persistence of patriarchal dynamics in the Italian social media context (Bonu Rosenkranz and Barone 2025); although numerically less present, women emerge in frames of *solidarity*, *political denunciation* and *feminist analysis*, positioning themselves as aligned with forms of linguistic resistance to structural sexism (Azzalini 2023; Giacometti 2025). This discursive polarization demonstrates how digital platforms are not neutral spaces, but places where hierarchies in Italian society are reproduced and at the same time contested, confirming interpretations of patriarchy as a resilient and constantly changing social system (Walby 1990; Connell 2020).

The summary given in Table 5 is remarkable in many respects. It shows the percentage distribution of discourse categories across the three social media platforms considered (FB, IG, and X). The percentages are not based on the total number of comments (427). Instead, the percentages relate to the number of comments on each platform: for example, 31% of posts of solidarity on X correspond to almost a third of the subcorpus for that platform, while the same category represents 24% for FB and 20% for IG. This makes it possible to capture the internal specificities of each digital environment ensuring that absolute quantitative differences (the FB corpus is numerically larger) do not obscure qualitative trends.

Semantic category	**FB (244)**	**IG (92)**	**X (91)**
Solidarity/indignation	24% (60)	20% (28)	31% (28)
Minimization/justification	16% (41)	13% (12)	14% (13)
Misogynistic/hostile comments	21% (53)	9% (8)	16% (15)
Media delegitimization or criticism	14% (36)	16% (15)	9.9% (9)
Whataboutism	11% (29)	10% (9)	8.8% (8)
Male self-criticism	10% (25)	0	0
Feminist structural analysis/activism	0	7% (6)	9.9%(9)
Political/ feminist complaints	0	15% (14)	0
Conspiracy theories/negationism	0	0	9.9% (9)

Table 5. Semantic categories within social media platforms

The analysis reveals different patterns: FB has a high percentage of *misogynistic/ hostile* comments (21%) and *minimizing* comments (16%), as well as a significant amount of *journalistic* or *political delegitimization* (14%), indicating a strong polarization in the discourse. IG, on the other hand, stands out for the predominance of the *solidarity/ indignation* category (20%) and for a more marked visibility of *feminist* frames (15% complaints, 7% structural analysis), with a lower incidence of explicit *misogyny* (9%). X shows a more hybrid landscape: *solidarity* (31%) and *delegitimization* (9.9%)

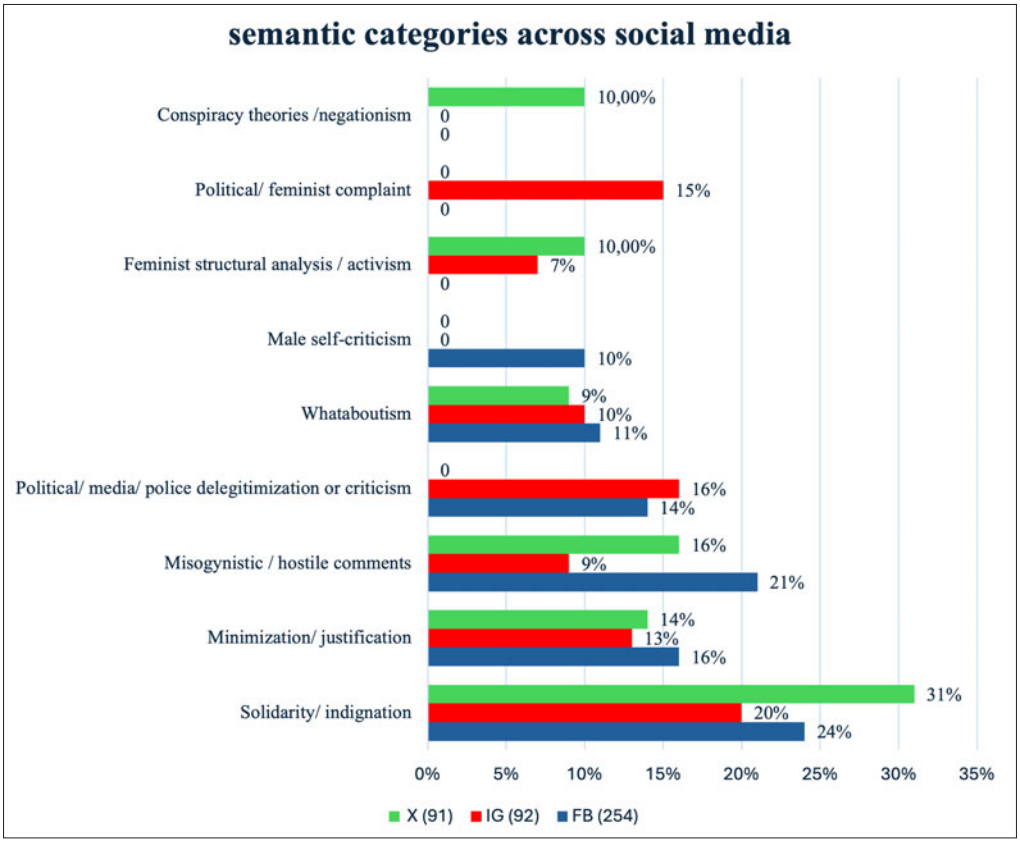

Figure 2. Distribution of semantic categories within social platforms (FB, IG, X)

coexist with significant percentages of *conspiracy theories* and *whataboutism*, which are less evident on Instagram. Figure 2, below, provides a visual representation of this distribution.

The different distribution of frames can also be interpreted in the light of generational variables: FB, which is mainly used by older users (AgCom 2025), and often socialized in controversial television discourse practices, tends to reproduce the dynamics of conflict, delegitimization and minimization. IG, more popular among young people and young adults (AgCom 2025), appears to be a space for counter-discourse, where the linguistic registers of solidarity and feminist activism spread more easily (Banet-Weiser 2018; Mendes *et al.* 2019). Finally, X seems to be a platform for rapid agenda-setting, where brevity and a high density of journalists and politicians among users favour both the visibility of indignation frames and the circulation of disinformation and denialist content (Hermida 2010; Papacharissi 2015).

Beyond discursive practices, the differences emerging across FB, IG and X can also be understood in light of their platform-specific architectures and affordances. In this sense, the role of social media in elaborating discourse frames around the *Phica.eu* scandal is not merely that of a neutral channel, but of a technologically mediated

environment which actively shapes the visibility, circulation and legitimization of particular stances through distinct communicative opportunities and constraints (Mascheroni and Vincent 2016). On each platform, the combination of interface design, content formats and engagement mechanics co-constructs the conditions under which indignation, minimization, misogyny or feminist activism can be expressed and recognized as salient frames.

FB, still largely organized around text-heavy posts, threaded comment sections and persistent discussion threads, affords extended argumentative exchanges, polarized back-and-forth interactions and the accumulation of conflict over time (Boccia Artieri 2012). This architecture favours the emergence of long comment chains in which users can repeatedly quote, attack and delegitimize one another, thus amplifying polemical and misogynistic frames as well as political and media delegitimization. In our data, the high incidence of misogynistic and minimizing comments, combined with systematic attacks on journalists and institutions, can be read as a direct outcome of these affordances, which make it easy to sustain protracted disputes and to normalize antagonistic, confrontational styles as legitimate forms of participation in the open debate.

IG, by contrast, is a visually-oriented platform where posts are structured around images and short captions, and where comments tend to be shorter, affectively loaded and tightly attached to specific visual artefacts (Highfield and Leaver 2016). These visual and interactional affordances, coupled with the centrality of influencers and activist accounts among younger cohorts (AgCom 2025), facilitate the emergence of frames centred on solidarity, feminist analysis and political denunciation (Banet-Weiser 2018). The predominance of solidarity/indignation and the visibility of feminist complaints in our corpus suggest that Instagram's architecture encourages users to cluster around supportive, expressive and identity-affirming framings, turning the platform into a space where counter-public feminist discourses can gain visibility and emotional resonance more easily than on Facebook.

X occupies a hybrid position, shaped by brevity and virality (Papacharissi 2015). The strict character limit, the emphasis on trending topics and hashtags, and the possibility of rapid re-circulation through retweets and quote-tweets create an environment oriented towards immediacy and agenda-setting rather than sustained deliberation (Hermida 2010). In this context, solidarity frames coexist with conspiracy narratives, whataboutism and negationist content, which benefit from the platform's propensity to reward provocative, concise and highly shareable messages. The presence of conspiracy theories and denialist comments in our data illustrates how X's affordances lower the threshold for the diffusion of disinformation and for reframing the scandal as either exaggerated or irrelevant, thereby reshaping the contours of the open debate around online gender violence.

Taken together, these observations show that social media platforms play a constitutive role in elaborating discourse frames around the *Phica.eu* scandal. Rather than being interchangeable arenas for public discussion, FB, IG and X provide distinct discursive ecologies, in which specific combinations of technological affordances and user cultures make certain interpretations of the scandal – *misogynistic normalization*, *feminist solidarity*, *institutional delegitimization* or *conspiratorial denial* – more likely to emerge, persist and circulate. In responding to our research question, this suggests that the "role" of platforms lies not only in hosting debate, but in structuring the very

possibilities for how gendered violence can be minimized, contested or transformed into a broader political issue within Italian digital publics.

5. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to analyse how the *Phica.eu* scandal is discursively framed on social media platforms, with a particular focus on FB, IG and X. To address this focus, I posed the following RQ:

What role do social media platforms play in elaborating discourse frames surrounding the Phica.eu scandal and in shaping the open debate on online gender violence?

The analysis was carried out via a quantitative and qualitative investigation of comments posted as a reaction to some posts about the *Phica.eu* scandal in Italy and uploaded to FB, IG and X. The investigation highlights how each platform constructs a different discursive environment around the scandal.

FB emerges as the site of maximum polarization. The majority of comments adopt a misogynistic or minimizing tone, often accompanied by delegitimizing attacks directed at journalists covering the case, a strongly gendered pattern, as male users overwhelmingly contribute to it. Although instances of male self-criticism are present, they remain isolated and insufficient to balance a space that is, overall, dominated by polemical noise.

On IG, by contrast, solidarity and indignation prevail, particularly among female users, who account for about one-third of contributions. Messages of support for the victims are accompanied by feminist activist voices and broader cultural analyses of patriarchy. Compared to FB, explicit misogyny is less visible. IG can thus be read as a space for counter-discourse, where solidarity and feminist activism gain visibility and resonance.

X presents a hybrid scenario where solidarity coexists with misogyny and minimization, but where conspiracy theories and negationist frames appear more prominently than on the other two platforms. Whataboutism is also particularly evident, with users frequently shifting the debate onto unrelated issues in order to downplay the scandal. The speed and virality of X make it an arena for immediate polarization, in which disinformation thrives and intersects with the dynamics of open debate. Here, too, gender differences are visible: male users dominate hostile, minimizing and whataboutism categories, while female voices are concentrated in solidarity and feminist complaints.

Non-identifiable users are especially active in conspiracy or negationist framings, suggesting that anonymity may facilitate the circulation of disinformation.

Furthermore, the differences across platforms can also be partly explained by generational usage patterns. FB, still dominant among older users (AgCom 2025), socialized in the culture of Mediaset-style polemics, reproduces a discursive environment marked by polarization, misogyny and delegitimization (Boccia Artieri 2012; Carlo 2022). IG, by contrast, is a platform with younger cohorts (AgCom 2025), where popular feminism and solidarity discourses are more visible (Banet-Weiser 2018; Mendes *et al.* 2019). X occupies a hybrid position: while it enables solidarity and advocacy, its affordances

(brevity, virality) also make it a fertile ground for disinformation and conspiratorial framings (Hermida 2010; Papacharissi 2015).

These results clearly demonstrate that social media cannot be treated as a homogeneous block. Each platform structures the conditions for open debate in distinct ways, with implications for how an open debate unfolds. On FB, it can easily degenerate into personal attacks and polarization, reflecting both the communicative habits of its predominantly older user base and the platform's affordances that favour extended, often aggressive exchanges. On IG, by contrast, an open debate aligns more closely with the model of counter-publics theorized by Fraser and Butler (2016): here solidarity, feminist advocacy and cultural critique circulate more visibly, offering a counter-discourse to the minimization and misogyny so dominant elsewhere. While X occupies a hybrid position, where solidarity and feminist voices coexist with misogyny, it clearly highlights the direct nexus between open debate and disinformation. Conspiratorial and denialist narratives gain traction through the brevity and virality of the medium, distorting reality while still claiming the status of legitimate debate.

These discursive ecologies shape differential access to open debate, privileging some linguistic practices (insults, slogans) while marginalizing others (analytical or feminist voices). In this arena, applied linguistics can play a key role in critical digital literacy and policy-making by exposing how linguistic forms (from insults to hashtags) reinforce or contest systemic inequalities.

Theoretically, these findings underscore the need to move beyond platform-agnostic analyses of digital discourse, treating affordances as co-producers of gendered framings (Mascheroni and Vincent 2016). In practice, they highlight policy implications: platforms must address architectural biases that amplify toxicity (e.g. algorithmic promotion of provocative content on X), while digital literacy initiatives should target platform-specific risks. Future research could extend this approach to longitudinal corpora, other scandals, or multimodal analysis of images and hashtags. Ultimately, the *Phica.eu* case reveals social media as ambivalent arenas: sites of resistance for marginalized voices, yet amplifiers of systemic violence unless structurally reformed.

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THE CULTURE WAR OVER AMERICAN EDUCATION: TAKING THE BATTLE ONLINE

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Abstract
Since the early 1980s education has been a polarizing political issue in the US context, not least thanks to the efforts of the Republican party. Starting with its party platforms of 1976 and 1980, the Republicans were able to establish a link between education and "family values" as a means to promote a new conservative agenda that put the 'traditional' family at the centre of the party's ideological universe. For the past four decades, favourite conservative talking points on the topic of education have included, among others, more school choice, marketplace competition, the dangers of (leftist) ideological indoctrination, as well as the goal of eliminating the Federal Department of Education (DoE), a Cabinet-level agency created by President Carter in 1979. When, on March 20, 2025, President Trump signed the Executive Order No. 14242 entitled "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities", it appeared that the long-awaited goal of abolishing DoE was achieved. This two-stage investigation aims to shed light on the use of disinformation strategies in the debate about the past, present, and future of education in the contemporary United States. I analyse two sets of texts that have made a significant contribution to this debate in a bid to identify the main constitutive elements of the popular conservative Narrative about American education. This is done by applying an intertextual lens to isolate and trace the circulation of key conservative ideas across time, genres and the boundaries of the offline and online environments.

Nothing is more important to the future of America than Education
Trump (2000: 91).

1. Introduction: the culture war over American education

This two-stage investigation analyses a set of texts that have made a significant contribution to the debate about the past, present and the future of education in the contemporary United States. With a Washington trifecta in the 2024 Election, which resulted in the election of Donald Trump as the forty-seventh President of the United

States and the Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, the stage was set for a major shift in the area of federal education policy under the leadership of the new Administration. In the conservative agenda, education is an area that sits between the two 'legs' of the "traditional 'three-legged stool'" (Cremer 2023: 397) represented, respectively, by a neo-liberal focus on limited government and a social conservative embrace of traditional family values, in addition to the 'third leg' of a neo-conservative emphasis on strong defence. Indeed, conservative education policy analysts have repeatedly pointed out that "[t]he battle over who should control America's schools is a battle for the future of our nation" (Marshall and Kafer 2005: 46). This battle, as the military metaphor hints at, has evolved into a full-scale culture war whose origins can be traced back to the early 1980s, a period when "questions about the proper role of government in arbitrating cultural values" (Critchlow 2008: 262) started to polarize the American electorate. As sociologists Dill and Hunter (2010: 275) put it:

> Education has been a central field for cultural conflict in the modern era. This is because schools are one of the primary institutions for imparting shared understandings of collective identity and purpose [...] schools do more than prepare students for the economy; they are normative institutions engaged in forming persons and legitimating social orders.

As the moral conflict over shared values and understandings of collective identity intensified, the Republican Party was able to capitalize on the growing cultural cleavage in American society by appropriating and discursively re-inventing terms such as "family" and "family values". These terms, to borrow Prothero's (2007: 222-223) words, were "injected into American cultural politics" in their current sense through the Republican Party platforms of 1976 and 1980, both of which "endorsed 'family values' as an antidote to what conservatives saw as the moral degradation of American society brought on by the sexual revolution, rock'n'roll, and the counterculture". The link between "family values" and education has continued to shape the conservative thinking about American education[1]. In this conservative worldview, a special priority has been assigned to the goal of eliminating the Department of Education (DoE), a Cabinet-level agency created by President Carter in 1979. In the build-up to the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump made his views about DoE known in his campaign-trail book, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (2015: 50-51):

> A lot of people believe the Department of Education should just be eliminated. Get rid of it. If we don't eliminate it completely, we certainly need to cut its power and reach. Education has to be run locally. Common Core, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top are all programs that take decisions away from parents and local school boards. These programs

[1] See, for example, a post by Linda M. Burke (2025), Director at the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, who wrote that "the best way to provide education accountability is by empowering families to choose the learning options that fit them and their values". This was posted on March 20, 2025, the day that the Executive Order No. 14242, authorizing the Secretary of Education "take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education" was signed by President Trump. Burke also authored the chapter on the Department of Education (Burke 2023) in Dans and Groves' (2023) *Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise*, better known as Project 2025, which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

> allow the progressives in the Department of Education to indoctrinate, not educate, our kids. What they are doing does not fit the American model of governance.
> I am totally against these programs and the Department of Education. It's a disaster. We cannot continue to fail our children – the very future of this nation.

Trump's talking points on the topic of education included more school choice, marketplace competition, transfer the management of student loans to private institutions and so on (*ibid.*: 49-60). These points struck the right chords with the hardliners in the conservative grassroots movements, who helped propel candidate Trump to nomination in the 2016 Republican Party primary. On education, these staunch conservatives would likely agree with conservative writers such as Frederick M. Hess (2015), who argued, for example, that many liberals supported the No Child Left Behind Act because they believed test-driven accountability would push schools to focus more on poor and minority children.

With one notable recent exception (Tebaldi 2025), the area of US education policy has attracted little attention within the broader domain of Political Discourse Analysis (PDA, e.g. Fairclough 2000; Cap 2002; Chilton 2004; Charteris-Black 2005; Wodak 2009). To rectify this neglect, I argue here that the culture war over American education offers an interesting test case to investigate the strategic use of language by conservative actors, whereby these actors routinely 1) identify a visible culprit in a polarizing debate, 2) promise quick-fix solutions to complex social issues and 3) claim credit for actions that were never accomplished. With the shift of the discussion online, the affordances of social media platforms have been exploited to spread disinformation, understood as "*false* information that is deliberately passed on with the intention to deceive or otherwise cause harm" (Maci *et al.* 2024: 2, italics in the original). The entry point to the investigation is the 2025 Executive Order (EO) No. 14242, "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities", signed by President Trump on March 20, 2025, during an Education Event that was live-streamed on the official White House YouTube channel[2]. The news about the signing of the EO was spread through several digital channels, including President Trump's official Truth account, the official White House YouTube channel, as well as several conservative media outlets (e.g. Fox News and Newsmax)[3]. Data from these digital environments, consisting of social media posts, video contents shared through digital channels, blog posts and online media discourse, represents the primary domain that supplied data for the present investigation of digitally-mediated conservative discourse around American education. The other domain subsumes institutional discourse, represented by the 2025 Exec. Order No. 1424, and expert discourse in the form of policy analysis reports compiled by the Heritage Foundation (HF), an influential Washington-based think tank that has been directly involved in the shaping of conservative policy in the area of education since the 1980s. The two sets of texts will be investigated mainly through an intertextual lens as

[2] See "President Trump Participates in an Education Event and Signs an Executive Order", https://www.youtube.com/live/ZjnoGgEJvLs.

[3] See, for example, "Final Bell Rings for Dept. of Education", The NEWSMAX Daily (03/21/25), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arad809DTXs, or "Secretary of Education Linda McMahon joins 'Sunday Morning Futures' to break down President Donald Trump's plan to dismantle the Department of Education", https://www.foxnews.com/video/6370791943112.

a means to explore the discursive strategies involved in the construction of the distinctly conservative vision of what American education should be about.

2. Intertextuality and intradiscursivity in the analysis of political discourse

Intertextuality in linguistics has proven to be a popular, yet elusive concept, whose philosophical foundations and related terminology have been heavily influenced by Bakhtin's work on the role of reported speech in narrative (1981) and multivocality (1986). As is well known, Kristeva (1980: 66, quoted in Hodges 2015: 44) is credited with the coinage of the term intertextuality to "describe the Bakhtinian idea that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'"[4]. As Hodges (*ibid.*) explains, the different types of dialogical connections theorized by Bakhtin (1986: 92-100) were subsumed under Kristeva's (1980) notions of the two axes of intertextuality, whereby the horizonal axis involves a subject-addressee relationship, while the vertical axis "deals with the orientation of a written text to the broader literary and cultural context in which it is embedded" (Hodges 2015: 44).

Fairclough's (1995) re-elaboration of the Bakhtinian notion of intertextuality, as applied specifically to the study of media discourse, has established itself as a dominant approach that has informed several CDA-based strands of linguistic research. This approach conceptualizes intertextuality as (Fairclough 1992: 84):

> the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth. In terms of production, an intertextual perspective stresses the historicity of texts: how they always constitute additions to existing "chains of speech communication" (Bakhtin 1986: 94) consisting of prior texts to which they respond.

Fairclough's 1995 seminal book, dealing with the changing discursive practices in the media, remains an invaluable point of reference for linguists interested in uncovering connections between language use and the exercise of power through an intertextual lens. Fairclough's (1995: 55) approach drew on the SFL-based notions that any text "is always simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and belief" as the main underlying premises about language use. According to Fairclough (*ibid.*), the multifaceted nature of the majority of texts, which can "involve complicated mixtures of different discourse types [which, in their turn are constitutive of] the order of discourse of a social institution or social domain", complicates the task of a media analyst who must necessarily move between the perspective of the particular (that is, the facets of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice for a given communicative event) and the perspective of the structure of the order of discourse (*ibid.*: 57-68).

Fairclough (*ibid.*: 61) distinguished between a linguistic analysis proper (i.e. the descriptive analysis of lexico-grammatical textual features) and an intertextual, interpretative analysis, employed to "unravel[ing] the various genres and discourses [...] which

[4] The passage in which the term appears reads as follows: a text is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality" (Kristeva 1980: 36, quoted in Hodges 2015: 44).

are articulated together in a text". Ultimately, for Fairclough (*ibid*.: 75), intertextual analysis is

> a bridge between the 'text' and 'discourse practice' dimensions in the critical discourse analysis framework. It is an analysis of texts [...] from the perspective of 'discourse processes' - in terms of the ways in which genres and discourses available within the repertoires of orders of discourse are drawn upon and combined in producing and consuming texts, and the ways in which texts transform and embed other texts which are in chain relationships with them.

Hodges (2011) can be cited as an example of a PDA analyst who has fruitfully applied the notion of intertextuality to the study of political discourse. By combining the Bakhtinian perspective on intertextuality with Bauman and Briggs' (1990) work on the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization, Hodges (2011: 8, italics in the original) argued that intertextuality

> is useful for the analysis of political discourse because it emphasizes the connections across multiple discursive encounters where issues are formulated and contested. Intertextual connections involve a process whereby a given piece of discourse is lifted from one setting – that is, it is *decontextualized* – and is inserted into another setting where it is *recontextualized* (Bauman and Briggs 1990). When a piece of discourse is moved from one context to another, it carries along aspects of the earlier context; but it is also transformed in the new context.

This "politics of recontextualization" (Hodges 2015: 49) involves controlling the interpretation not just of prior, but also of future texts. Moreover, recontextualization as a discursive phenomenon also draws attention to the constraining effects of discourse understood, in the Foucauldian tradition, as a notion that "merges concerns about ideology with language [by exercising constraint over] what can be said about a topic and how the topic is reasoned about" (*ibid*.: 53-54). In Hodges' (2011) book, the intertextual lens was applied to analyse the manifold connections in American public discourse about George W. Bush's "War on Terror" Narrative. The materials analysed by Hodges included samples from three different public discourse domains, such as presidential speeches, media discourse and focus group interviews. Campolong's (2022) recent analysis of the discursive strategies involved in the construction of the "crowd size" conspiracy theories has repurposed the notion of intertextuality to study President Trump's campaign-style rally speeches. In Campolong's (2022: 424-426) investigation, intertextuality was identified as one of the key discursive strategies related to the repetition of specific assumptions and language patterns, together with the use of stock phrases, numbers, insults, and recursivity. Campolong's study further distinguished between *intertextual* links between texts of the same speech genre (e.g. Trump rallies) and *intradiscursive* links, i.e. "the interaction of texts, utterances or concepts within a particular discourse [that] includes texts across all speech genres (e.g. Trump rallies, interviews, press conferences, Twitter posts, etc.) (*ibid*: 424)[5]. The above-mentioned examples of

[5] *Intradiscursivity* is not to be confused with *interdiscursivity* as employed by Fairclough (1992: 104)

PDA work using an intertextual lens (Hodges 2011; Campolong 2022) will inform the analysis of my dataset, which will be presented in the Sections that follow.

3. Constructing the Narrative: focus on conservative actors and policy documents, 1983-2025.

My exploration of the recurrent discursive strategies involved in the construction of a particular conservative Narrative about American education starts with the analysis of the main constitutive elements of this Narrative. These will be identified in the first set of materials under investigation (see Table 1) that includes the text of Executive Order (EO) No. 14242, as well as the individual chapters dedicated to the topic of education in transition agenda reports produced by the Heritage Foundation (HF), an influential conservative advocacy think tank (Donadio and Napolitano 2011: 308), in the period between 1983 and 2025. The decision to include HF reports is not coincidental. The foundation's mission, as its website states, is "to champion policy solutions that benefit all Americans"[6]. HF established its connection to the Republican party already in the 1980s, when the newly-founded think tank led a set of parallel task forces to generate its first 1,093-page *Mandate for Leadership* report. This report contained (Hayward 2009: 47-48):

> a detailed agenda for each major federal agency and policy area. A typical chapter about a cabinet department or federal regulatory agency itemized specific programs to be cut or eliminated, grants to be canceled, regulations to be changed, executive orders to be repealed or amended, and statues to be reformed [..] Reagan passed out prepublication copies of *Mandate* to his incoming cabinet secretaries and senior staff in December [1980].

The 1980 report started a productive partnership between HF and the Reagan administration that has continued with the subsequent Republican administrations[7]. Today HF represents one of the most high-profile Washington powerhouses in conservative circles. As previous studies have pointed out (e.g. Donadio and Napolitano 2011), HF's lobbying powers and influence on the Republican party makes it "politically [most] representative of the neo-conservative mindset" (*ibid*.: 305)[8]. More recently, the amount of publicity that HF's 2023 report (better known as "Project 2025", see fn. 2) generated, calls for further investigation into the foundation's vital contribution to the construction of a broader conservative Narrative around education in the United States. For the present investigation, a set of HF reports were analysed with the view to trace the origin and development of conservative ideas that laid the groundwork for President

to refer to "the confluence of discourse conventions that contribute to text production" (quoted in Hodges 2015: 44).

[6] See www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission.

[7] This is how Blasko (2004) describes this relationship: "Heritage was President Reagan's favorite think tank, and Reagan was the embodiment of the ideas and principles Heritage holds dear. Together, we blazed a new path for America". See Donadio and Napolitano (2011) on the relationship between HF and the Bush administration.

[8] The authors highlight the fact that "Heritage papers are conceived as an operative tool in the hands of Republican congressmen: reports on relevant legislative issues are delivered to political representatives and their staff in the Congress daily and directly" (Donadio and Napolitano 2011: 308).

Trump's EO No. 14242. As a way to bridge over to the next Section in this paper, a recent commentary article written for *The Washington Examiner* by Rep. Miller and Rep. Harris (2025) was added to the set[9]. This was done to include an example of a representative opinion piece on the topic of education of the kind that President Trump typically reposts on Truth Social[10]. Finally, a blog post by Burke (2025)[11] was added to the same set. As the goal of the analysis was to identify both intertextual and intradiscursive recurrent strategies (cf. Campolong 2022) employed by different conservative actors to promote a specific vision for American education, it was decided to include texts representing different genres.

Year, author	Title	Text type
Phelps-Patterson, Lucy, 1983	Education	HF report
Gardner, Eileen M., 1984	The Department of Education	HF report
Butler, Stuart M., 1989	Domestic Policy Overview	HF report
Kimberling, C. Ronald, 1989	The Department of Education	HF report
Marshall, Jennifer A. and Krista Kafer, 2005	Strengthening the civil society	HF report
Burke, Lindsey M., 2023	Department of Education	HF report
Miller, Mary and Mark Harris, 2025	Trump is right: The Department of Education must go	online commentary article
Burke, Lindsey M., 2025	No, we don't need the Department of Education after all	blog post
Exec. Order No. 14242, 2025	Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities	EO

Table 1. Texts analysed in this section, arranged chronologically

The first analytical step was informed by Hodge's (2011) examination of the "War on Terror" Narrative (cf. Section 2). Drawing on Bruner's (1991) and Gee's (1986) analyses of the interrelationship between the whole text and its constituent parts (Hodges 2011: 41), Hodges (*ibid.*: 42) identified several key episodes in the "War on Terror" Narrative, that is to say, constitutive elements that supported the interpretation of "the text as a whole". In Hodge's analysis, the events of 9/11 represent the starting point of the "War on Terror" Narrative. In Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) terminology,

[9] Republican Congresswoman Mary E. Miller has been serving as the U.S. representative for Illinois's 15th district since 2021; Republican Congressman Mark E. Harris has been serving as the U.S. representative for North Carolina's 8th district since 2025.

[10] See https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114180392545290249. For more examples of reposts of news articles, see https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114140349109974410 and https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114140388991275650.

[11] See fn. 2 in Section 1.

this starting point is defined (Hodges 2011: 43) as "a precipitating event" which acts "as the pivot around which the rest of the Narrative is organized". In the conservative Narrative about American education, the creation, in 1979, of DoE, at the initiative of President Jimmy Carter and endorsed by the country's largest teachers' union, play the role of the precipitating event. As such, the reference to the creation of DoE is the first element that, intertextually and intradiscursively, links the different texts in the first set, as the following examples show (the relevant passages are highlighted in bold):

(1) **The establishment of a Cabinet-level DoE** was an historic blunder, a combination of overweening federal ambition and pandering to interest groups (Gardner 1984);

(2) It is past time to admit that the Education Department has produced a terrible return on America's investment. **Since its creation in 1980**, test scores have dropped, with math and reading scores falling to their lowest levels in decades under former President Joe Biden. Civics knowledge is abysmal, as evidenced by middle school U.S. history scores recently hitting all-time lows (Miller and Harris 2025);

(3) [O]ne of the newest Cabinet agencies, **the Department of Education [...] has existed for less than one fifth of our Nation's history. The Congress created the Department of Education in 1979 at the urging of President Jimmy Carter, who received a first ever Presidential endorsement from the country's largest teachers' union** [...]. Since then, **the Department of Education has entrenched the education bureaucracy** and sought to convince America that Federal control over education is beneficial (EO 14242).

This series of strategic repetitions contribute to the discursive construction of the myth of the creation of DoE as the watershedding event that marked the beginning of an era during which student academic achievement steadily declined across all age groups, teaching and learning standards deteriorated and the school system became ideologically biased. In this Narrative, DoE becomes the main, if not the only, reason why the American education system is failing children, young adults, their families and teachers alike.

The second constitutive element in the Narrative, illustrated in the next set of examples, focuses our attention on the concrete, tangible consequences brought about by the precipitating event. Most importantly, these include the fiscal burden and the federal control burden that DoE imposed on, respectively, individual taxpayers/states and schools/teachers. The two talking points are imported from the broader conservative ideology that champions a small federal government with limited powers (see Introduction), reduces bureaucratic oversight and lowers taxes:

(4) hundreds of education programs […] have had little discernible effect on achievement. Instead, all have contributed to **the growth of bureaucracy in Washington, an increase in administrative burdens on the states, and the creation of a massive education lobby** (Marshall and Kafer 2005);

(5) Federal money is inevitably accompanied by **rules and regulations that keep the influx of funds from having much, if any, impact on student outcomes**. It raises the cost of education without raising student achievement (Burke 2023);

(6) the Department of Education's legacy is one of **bureaucratic waste and federal overreach** (Burke 2025);

(7) **Taxpayers spent around $200 billion at the Federal level** on schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, **on top of the more than $60 billion they spend annually on Federal school funding**… [DoE] maintains a public relations office that includes **over 80 staffers at a cost of more than $10 million per year** (EO 14242).

Of particular importance in these examples is the use of numbers (see examples 4 and 7). As Campolong points out (2022: 430), the use of numbers is "a well-worn trope in political discourse, insinuating a particular kind of knowledge and expertise"[12]. The use of numbers, often combined with hyperbolic, negatively-laden evaluative vocabulary (*waste, overreach, abysmal, terrible*, etc.), serves as a means to reinforce the cause-and-effect link between the creation of DoE and the present dire state of American education.

Furthermore, the burden of an ideological kind is developed as a separate constitutive element in the following examples that are dedicated to "the demands of special interests":

(8) For decades, the quality of our schools has declined as **the demands of special interests have trumped the needs of children and the dreams of parents** (Marshall and Kafer 2005).

(9) The next Administration should take particular note of how **radical gender ideology is having a devastating effect on school-aged children today – especially young girls** (Burke 2023).

(10) Washington bureaucrats have failed our families and have put **their radical ideology over the actual educational needs of our children** (Miller and Harris 2025).

(11) [the Secretary of Education is authorized] to ensure that the allocation of any Federal Department of Education funds is subject to rigorous compliance with Federal law and Administration policy, including the requirement that any program or activity receiving Federal assistance terminate illegal discrimination obscured **under the label "diversity, equity, and inclusion" or similar terms and programs promoting gender ideology** (EO 14242).

Taken together, the creation of DoE as the precipitating event that triggered a three-pronged attack on American education – through excessive federal control, unrestrained taxation, and harmful leftist ideological indoctrination – represent the main constitutive elements in this conservative Narrative. As this analysis has shown, these elements have been part and parcel of the conservative agenda since the early 1980s. In the closing stage of this Narrative we find a series of "solutions" to "fix" American education, proposed by different conservative actors. Three such solutions are set in stone in the EO. These are 1) eliminating DoE completely by "returning" education to the States; 2) empowering families through choice and competition, i.e. by enabling

[12] Cf. also van Dijk's (1988: 87) observation on numbers in news discourse as a way to "forcefully [suggest] truthfulness by the implied exactness of precise numbers."

them to choose alternative forms of education over "the public school monopoly" and 3) eradicating any federal programs associated with "the demands of special interests" (see example 11 above):

(12) Federal strings need to be detached to restore parental authority and involvement to the nation's public schools. [**Parents] should be given a choice as to where their education tax dollars should be spent**. By stimulating competition, schools will be immediately forced to improve or suffer the consequences. [This] is the proven, common-sense notion that giving consumers the ability to decide how to spend their money makes providers of goods and services more responsive than they are under today's centrally administered education system (Kimberling 1989).

(13) Federal education policy should be limited and, ultimately, **the federal Department of Education should be eliminated**. When power is exercised, it should **empower students and families**, not government. In our pluralistic society, families and students should be **free to choose from a diverse set of school options** and learning environments that best fit their needs (Burke 2023).

(14) We must return to a time when the government recognizes that parents, on the whole, know their children better than even the most skilled and well-meaning teachers ever could. That's not a criticism — it's just a natural reality. And that reality informs the duty that parents have in raising their children and **the rights they have in determining how those children will be educated**. This used to be common sense […] (Miller and Harris 2025).

(15) Our Nation's bright future relies on **empowered families, engaged communities, and excellent educational opportunities for every child**. […] **Closing the Department of Education** would provide children and their families the opportunity to escape a system that is failing them. […] **Closure of the Department of Education** would drastically improve program implementation in higher education. […] Ultimately, **the Department of Education's main functions can, and should, be returned to the States** (EO 14241).

In this last set of examples, in addition to the persistent recycling of the same "solutions", we also find some additional elements that establish new intertextual and intradiscursive links between the texts under investigation. These elements include the idea of "common-sense" decision-making, the urgency of "returning" education to the States, together with the need to expand school choice and make the education system more competitive. All of the key talking points that have emerged from the analysis presented in this section can be identified in President Trump's contribution to the conservative Narrative about education, as the analysis of his communication strategy on Truth, conducted in Section 4, will show.

4. Showcasing the future of education on Truth

The second set of texts that will be analysed in this section consists of a small corpus of posts collected from President Trump's Truth account in the period between March 10 and March 25, 2025, i.e., respectively, ten days before and five days after the signing of the EO No. 14242 on March 20, 2025. Only posts that directly addressed the topic

of education by, for example, informing his followers about the signing of the EO, were selected for the analysis (see Table 2 later in this section for the list of the posts). Before discussing the ways in which President Trump was able to exploit the affordances of Truth to publicize his role in the re-shaping of American education, three background facts need to be explicated. DoE, as a Cabinet-level agency[13], can only be eliminated through major congressional legislation that would require Democratic support in the Senate in order to obtain the necessary 60 votes. That Congress needs to pass appropriate legislation to abolish DoE was a topic discussed during Linda McMahon's confirmation hearings for the position of the Secretary of Education[14]. Indeed, in April 2025, Rep. Moore (AL-1) introduced H.R.2691 entitled "To abolish the Department of Education and to provide funding directly to States for elementary and secondary education, and for other purposes" in the House of Representatives. The bill was immediately referred to the Committee on Education and Workforce, but no further action has been recorded since then[15]. At the time of writing (November 2025), DoE still exists, although a major reduction in the workforce has been implemented, and some offices and programs have now been moved to other parts of the federal government (Meckler 2025). So, the first, and probably the most important, background fact is that President Trump's EO did not actually eliminate DoE.

Secondly, the slogan of "returning education to the States", which has gained even more traction[16] since the 1980s, when, as we saw in Section 3, it was first introduced as a reaction to the creation of DoE[17], is factually incorrect. As is clearly stated on the DoE website:

> Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation. […] Despite the growth of the Federal role in education, the Department never strayed far from what would become its official mission: to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.
>
> The Department carries out its mission in two major ways. First, the Secretary and the Department play a leadership role in the ongoing national dialogue over how to improve the results of our education system for all students. […]

[13] In 1979, DoE was established by Congress through "An act to establish a Department of Education, and for other purposes", S.210 - 96th Congress (1979-1980), https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/210/all-actions, and then signed into law by President Carter.

[14] See "Education Secretary Nominee Linda McMahon Testifies at Confirmation Hearing", February 13, 2025, at https://www.c-span.org/program/senate-committee/education-secretary-nominee-linda-mcmahon-testifies-atconfirmation-hearing/655487.

[15] See "H.R.2691 - 119th Congress (2025-2026): To abolish the Department of Education and to provide funding directly to States for elementary and secondary education, and for other purposes." *Congress.gov*, Library of Congress, 7 April 2025, at https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/2691. It is a short bill (roughly 350 words), consisting of two main sections: SECTION 1. ABOLISHMENT OF DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, and SECTION 2. BLOCK GRANTS TO STATES.

[16] In fact, the "Returning Education to the States Tour", at https://www.ed.gov/about/initiatives/returning-education-states-tour, is one of the most recent initiatives launched by DoE in September 2025.

[17] Cf. Gardner (1984: 51) on "return[ing] responsibility for education to its rightful place: the states and localities".

> Second, the Department pursues its twin goals of access and excellence through the administration of programs that cover every area of education and range from preschool education through postdoctoral research[18].

Indeed, this second basic fact was confirmed by the current Secretary of Education, Linda McMahon, in an interview given on Fox News shortly after EO No. 14242 had been signed by President Trump:

> (3:17) The Department of Education doesn't educate one child.
> (3:20) We don't decide on curriculum.
> (3:22) We don't hire teachers.
> (3:23) That's best done at the local level[19].

It would appear that the slogan of "returning education to the states" has been gaining currency thanks to its potential "to index [a] narrative and reinforce its message in the minds of voters" (Hodges 2014: 347). By discursively repackaging the decision to (start to) dismantle a Cabinet-level agency as a move to "return education to the states", i.e. as a means to eliminate federal oversight and facilitate decision-making at the local level[20], the conservative Narrative has transformed the decision into a long-awaited solution that will (presumably) fix the education system. From an intradiscursive perspective, this slogan, for conservative voters, capitalizes on such recent momentous SCOTUS rulings as, for example, *Dobbs v. Jackson*, that returned the issue of abortion to the States.

Thirdly, the general public has very limited knowledge of how executive orders work as an instrument of presidential power. Executive orders can be defined as "legal instruments that create or modify laws, procedures, and policy by fiat" (Mayer 2002: 4). However, for some of these actions the actual impact is limited, as Lowande (2024: 4, italics in the original) explains:

> After some of these actions, *almost nothing happens*. No policies change. No status quo is challenged. Commissions are formed, nonbinding and inconsequential reports issues. Bureaucrats make minor changes to what they had planned to do, but even those might be superficial or symbolic.

This less-known fact is at odds with the wide media coverage that executive actions typically receive (*ibid.*: 3):

[18] https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/federal-role-in-education. Recent information about the allocation of federal funds can be found in "Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Summary" report available at https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/overview/budget/budget25/summary/25summary.pdf.

[19] See https://www.foxnews.com/video/6370791943112, "Trump's education secretary warns America is 'doing something wrong,' says 'we need to change'. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon joins 'Sunday Morning Futures' to break down President Donald Trump's plan to dismantle the Department of Education, March 23, 2025.

[20] All of which the EO does not do, as I explained in the first paragraphs of this section.

> When presidents sign orders, they put on a show. They invite cameras to ceremonies and issue press releases. They pose for photos with activists, politicians, and special interests. Today, these "executive actions" are normal in the United States […].

This is not to say that such actions are always inconsequential, even when they do not produce real policy changes. Executive orders are imbued with high symbolic potential as actions that can help the President to take a clear stance on a given issue, at the same time as they can help claim credit for acting (*ibid.*). In other words, executive orders are routinely used to produce "the *appearance* of governing" in a policy area where the executive branch does not have the capacity to implement drastic reform (*ibid.*: 65, italics in the original). But how exactly can "the *appearance* of governing" be produced by exploiting the affordances of modern-day digital platforms?

In order to answer this question, in what follows I will use three examples extracted from my small corpus of President Trump's Truth posts addressing the topic of education (see Table 2).

March 10, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114140349109974410
March 10, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114140388991275650
March 18, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114180392545290249
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196632592140620
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196809553032233
March 20, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196857285570492
March 21, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114201240645206997
March 24, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114215732492267429
March 24, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114219231809224627
March 25, 2025	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114220293842425737

Table 2. President Trump's posts about education, March 10 to March 25, 2025

The three examples that I will deal with in more detail were posted on Truth on March 20, the day the EO No. 14242 was signed, at 9.25 pm (Post #1), 10.10 pm (Post #2), and 10.22 pm respectively (Post #3).

Post #1 contains a link to the full video of the Education Event during which the EO was signed. The full video (16 minutes 11 seconds) was live-streamed on the official White House channel. Interestingly, the caption under the visual – "President Trump Participates in an Education Event and Signs an Executive Order" – does not specify what kind of EO had been signed. Analysing the audio track that is monopolized by a lengthy monologue given by President Trump, we can identify the familiar constitutive elements that different actors have consistently employed to construct a distinctly conservative vision of the state of American education (see Section 3). For example, here President Trump reiterates the importance of the precipitating event:



Figure 1. Post #1, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196632592140620

> 05:34 **When President Carter created the Federal Education Department in 1979**, it was opposed by members of his own cabinet as well as the American Federation of Teachers, the New York Times Editorial Board, and the famed Democrat Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. History has proven them right, absolutely right.

Earlier in the video, the idea of eliminating DoE as "the right thing to do" was introduced through strategic repetitions:

> 02:50 **Department of Education, we're going to eliminate it**; and **everybody knows it's right**. And the Democrats know **it's right**, and I hope they're going to be voting for it because ultimately it may come before them, but **everybody knows it's right**.

The solution of "returning education to the States" is made symbolically prominent thanks to the presence of nine Republican State Governors, from Texas, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, Louisiana, Tennessee, Idaho, Nebraska, and Iowa, at the Education event. The presence of the Governors, even if they only make offscreen appearances, is made



Figure 2. Post #2, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196809553032233

known to the public through President Trump's introductions, and, in some cases, direct interactions with the Governors. Once again, through a series of repetitions that are a typical feature of Trumpian discourse (cf. Campolong 2022), the slogan is verbalized explicitly by President Trump:

> 09:08 We want to **return our students to the states** where just some of the governors here are so happy about this. They want education **to come back to them**, **to come back to the states**, and they're going to do a phenomenal job. […] 11:01 **we're going to be returning education**, very simply, **back to the states where it belongs**. And this is a very popular thing to do, but much more importantly, it's a common-sense thing to do. And it's going to work. Absolutely, it's going to work. And I can tell you from dealing with the governors and others in the state, they want it so badly.

It is not at all clear what President Trump means here by "returning education to the states", given that, as has explained above, education has always been "primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States" (see the statement on the DoE website quoted above). But he is quick to claim that "this is a very popular thing to do,



Figure 3. Post #3, https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/114196857285570492

but much more importantly, it's a common-sense thing to do", establishing an intradiscursive link to the texts that used the same talking point of "common sense" in Section 3. Forty-five minutes after the first post, Post #2 appeared on the same platform.

This second post contains a link to a short version of the video linked in Post #1. The duration of the video has been reduced drastically (from 16 minutes 11 second to only 29 seconds). This was done by extracting specific segments and remixing them to produce the short version. A different visual was chosen as the cover image for Post #2, featuring President Trump who is holding up the signed document. At the top, the visual contains a caption that reads "President Trump Signs Executive Order to Eliminate the Department of Education."

Finally, Post #3 that followed the first two – 12 minutes after the second and almost one hour after the first – contains a link to the text of the EO. The visual used here features President Trump looking happy and smiling, glancing over from the stage at two children whose blurred faces appear in the foreground.

Post #2 (total length, 00:29)	Post #1 (total length, 16:11)
00:00 [*smiling President Trump holding up and showing to the audience the signed Executive Order*]	14:37 [*smiling President Trump holding up and showing to the audience the signed Executive Order*]
00:02 today we take a very historic action that was 45 years in the making	02:24 today we take a very historic action that was 45 years in the making
00:06 in a few moments I will sign an executive order	02:28 in a few moments I will sign an executive order
00:10 to begin eliminating the federal	02:30 to begin eliminating the federal
00:13 department of education once and for all	02:33 department of education once and for all
00:15 [*Applause*]	02:35 [*Applause*]
00:17 should I do this? [*the question is addressed to the audience of young children who were present at the Event*]	13:47 should I do this? [*the question is addressed to the audience of young children who were present at the Event*]
00:21 should I do this?	13:51 should I do this?
00:23 [*President Trump at the desk signing the Executive Order*]	14:19 [*President Trump at the desk signing the Executive Order*]
00:25 okay [*and he holds up the signed order*]	14:30 okay [*and he holds up the signed order*]
00:28 [*Applause*]	14:33 [*Applause*]

Table 3. Comparison between the two versions of the audio tracks in Post #1 and Post #2

Apart from the captions, no additional text is found in the three posts. While a detailed, CMDA-informed video analysis is beyond the scope of this paper[21], some preliminary observations can be made by comparing the audio tracks of the full version with the heavily abridged version of the same video, with the full version linked in Post #1 and the short version linked in Post #2. Comparing the two audio tracks, we can see that President Trump's lengthy monologue (roughly 2000 words) in Post #1 has been reduced to roughly 40 words (see Table 3).

The timestamps in the two videos clearly show that the segments of the original long video have been remixed to focus our attention on what Lowande (see above) has called "the *appearance* of governing": for example, the final sequence of the original version has been used as the opening sequence in the short version, as a means to reinforce the "getting it done" message of the second video (see Figure 4).

Moreover, as we can see in Figure 4, the distance/camera angle and the presence/absence of onscreen participants have been tweaked in the same sequence as well: by zooming in onto President Trump in Post #2 and leaving the children out, our attention is focused on the sole protagonist of the event. The addition of the caption in Post #2 is also highly significant. In an interesting twist, the caption distorts President Trump's own words by omitting the important verb "to begin" (as in "*to begin* eliminating the

[21] CMDA stands for Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis, i.e, a critical analysis of multimodal discourse. See Vasta's paper in this volume for a detailed discussion of this methodological approach.

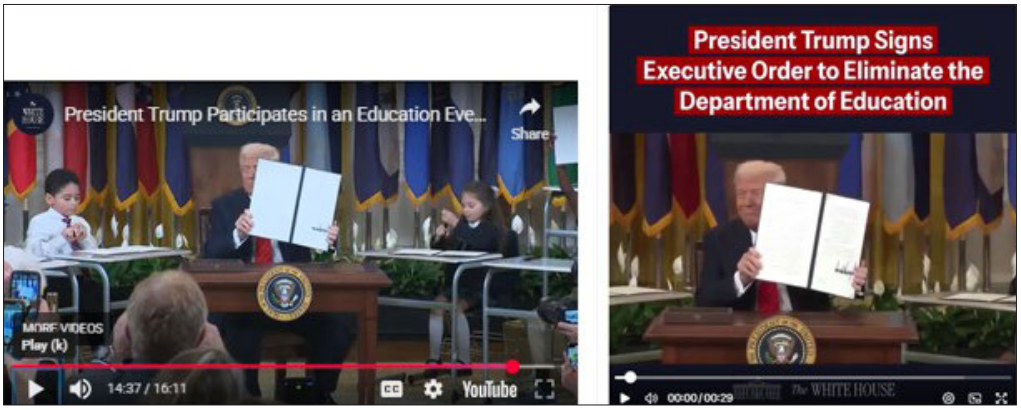

Figure 4. Comparison between the two sequences in Post #1 (left) and Post #2 (right)

Federal Department of Education", see Table 3). The result is a caption that can be interpreted as either ambiguous or outright false: DoE was not actually eliminated after President Trump had signed the EO.

5. Concluding remarks

When, on February 12, 2025, President Trump was asked a question about how soon he wanted to have DoE closed, his answer – that the DoE is a "big con job" – sent a clear message about a forthcoming "historic" decision. Once the EO was signed on March 20, President Trump took to Truth to share the news with the public. While the EO did not actually eliminate the DoE, President Trump was able to successfully exploit the affordance of Truth to leverage the symbolic potential of signing an executive order. In fact, he put on a media show and took credit for maintaining a campaign promise to eliminate DoE, probably hoping that the public will not "pay attention to most policy changes or retain information about who was responsible for a change" (Lowande 2024: 17). In other words, by using carefully curated video materials, President Trump was able to produce "the appearance of governing" (cf. Section 4).

This two-stage exploratory analysis has confirmed that, in the new technological era, social media platforms offer novel ways of abusing the means of political communication by spreading falsehoods, using manipulations, omitting important details or even refusing to speak (Chilton 2023: 12). In the conservative Narrative about American education examples of such falsehoods, manipulations, simplifications and omissions abound. Most importantly, the scapegoating of DoE for the failings of the education system that has not stopped since the 1980s is a convenient excuse for not investigating the complex, large-scale economic, technological, cultural and social changes that are responsible for the dismal state of American education today. The culture war rages on.

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THE EU DEFORESTATION REGULATION'S "MYTH BUSTER": A CRITICAL MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WEBPAGE AND ITS AUTOMATED TRANSLATION INTO ITALIAN

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical examination of the European Union's communication strategy for the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), focusing on the "Myth Buster" webpage and its Italian automated translation. The website employs a strategy aimed at broad accessibility, which, however, seems to reinforce the epistemic authority of English. The Italian translation is positioned as a provisional access point, shaping public engagement and perceptions of EU environmental policies across a linguistically and culturally diverse citizenry. The paper also evaluates the role of visual discourse in this strategy, particularly in terms of its effectiveness in debunking the "myths" addressed by the webpage, which forms part of the EUDR implementation procedures, and the communicative challenges this strategy entails. The insights presented in this paper relate to the theme of the international seminar *Social Media, Disinformation and the Future of Open Debate* insofar as the efforts to correct misguided interpretations of the EUDR risk generating a further round of misinterpretation. The paper is thus set against the backdrop of potential political manipulation and disinformation, a risk which always arises in the EU's complex cultural reality when carefully checked translations are not used.

1. Introduction

The European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), formally Regulation (EU) 2023/1115[1], constitutes one of the most ambitious recent attempts to reduce the EU's contribution to global deforestation and forest degradation (European Parliament and Council 2023). In force since June 2023, the EUDR introduces stringent due diligence obligations, including the provision of verifiable geolocation data and traceability mechanisms capable of demonstrating that supply chains are deforestation-free (European Commission 2020). Given the technical complexity of the Regulation and the diversity of actors involved – from smallholder farmers to multinational corporations and third-country governments – it is unsurprising that the EUDR has generated extensive

[1] The full text of the EUDR can be accessed here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32023R1115.

debate and, crucially, interpretative issues. These misunderstandings have circulated widely in public discourse and have required targeted communicative interventions by the European Commission. One such intervention is the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage[2] (European Commission 2023), designed to clarify common misconceptions and provide accessible explanations of the Regulation's aims and requirements.

Communicating such a complex policy across the European Union's 27 Member States presents a significant challenge. The EU is characterized by its vast linguistic and cultural diversity, with 24 official languages forming part of Europe's "immense and diverse cultural heritage" (Gotti 2014: 195). Ensuring that all citizens have equitable access to institutional information is not only a legal obligation but also a fundamental condition for democratic legitimacy and public participation (Gazzola 2016: 547). This challenge becomes even more pronounced in policy domains – such as environmental regulation – where technical terminology, specialized procedures, and high political sensitivity converge. As Maci *et al*. (2024: 5) observe, "the generation, circulation, and application of information is a highly complex phenomenon which has immense bearing on how society operates".

In this context, the European Commission increasingly relies on digital tools to disseminate information rapidly and efficiently. Among these tools, machine translation (MT) has become a central component of the EU's multilingual communication infrastructure. MT promises speed and scalability in contexts where large volumes of information must be made available across multiple languages (Hutchins 2005: 8; Giampieri 2023: 12). However, its use in sensitive policy communication raises important questions about accuracy, register, and the potential for misinterpretation – particularly when translation quality is understood as a dynamic, negotiated concept shaped by purpose, utility, time, and cost (Biel 2017: 33). The Myth Buster webpage is a case in point, as it is translated into multiple languages using MT. Interestingly, the webpage explicitly refers to its English version as the most reliable source, which raises doubts about what can be trusted when the whole goal of the webpage is to convey the message "trust us, not others". At the same time, however, it cites the text of the EUDR, a multilingual official document produced by the European Commission, where both the English and Italian versions hold equal authority[3]. Arguably, in legal translation, "each authentic text is deemed independent for the purpose of interpretation by the courts and no single text (not even the original) should prevail in the event of an ambiguity or textual diversity between the various language versions" (Šarcević 1997: 71). As equally authentic instruments of the law, "parallel legal texts can be effective only if all indirect addressees are guaranteed equality before the law" (Šarcević 2000: 71). One reason for this is that "the practice of giving priority to the original text has been declared incompatible with the principle of equal authenticity" (Šarcević 1997: 200). Thus, citing the EU's multilingual legal texts serves to re-establish parity between the

[2] https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/nature-and-biodiversity/deforestation-regulation-implementation/eudr-myth-buster_en.

[3] Machine translation was not employed in the translation of either the EUDR official text (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32023R1115&qid=1687867231461) or the EUDR Guidance Document (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025XC04524.

two languages, and indirectly substantiates the Italian version of the "Myth Buster" webpage[4] as a reliable text.

Against this background, this paper examines the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage. More specifically, it analyses the multimodal structure of the English webpage, focusing on how visual and verbal resources work together to construct clarity, authority, and persuasive force; examines the automated Italian translation, assessing whether and how MT-related limitations affect nuance, register, and the communicative effectiveness of the myth-busting strategy; and explores the broader implications of relying on automated translation for EU policy communication, particularly in relation to linguistic equality and the risk of generating further misunderstanding.

The working hypothesis is that while the multimodal design of the webpage is intended to enhance accessibility and reduce cognitive load, the automated translation may introduce subtle shifts in meaning and tone that cumulatively weaken the persuasive intent of the myth-busting discourse. Moreover, the presence of an explicit disclaimer directing users back to the English version suggests an implicit hierarchy of epistemic authority that merits critical examination.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the EUDR and outlines the communicative role of the "Myth Buster" webpage; Section 3 examines multilingual and machine-translated communication in the EU as the contextual framework for the case study; Section 4 analyses the English webpage and discusses selected instances of the Italian automated translation; Section 5 discusses the broader implications of the findings; and Section 6 presents concluding reflections on the challenges and potential future directions for multilingual EU communication.

2. The EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the "Myth Buster" webpage

The implementation of the EUDR has generated a wide range of reactions among stakeholders, including producers, traders, civil society organizations, and third-country governments. As documented in recent studies and policy reports, concerns have emerged regarding administrative burdens, compliance costs, fairness of risk classification, and the potential impact on smallholders and SMEs (Judijanto 2025; Villiers 2022; Gallemore *et al.* 2025; Harrison and Paulini 2024; EuroCommerce 2024). These concerns have circulated widely in public debate and have contributed to the formation of a series of "myths" about the Regulation. In response, the European Commission created the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage (Figure 1), a digital communication tool designed to clarify misconceptions and provide accessible explanations of the Regulation's aims and requirements:

[4] https://green-forum.ec.europa.eu/nature-and-biodiversity/deforestation-regulation-implementation/eudr-myth-buster_en?prefLang=it. As specified by the European Commission this "translation is generated by eTranslation, a machine translation tool provided by the European Commission. Machine translation can give you a basic idea of the content in a language you understand. It is fully automated and involves no human intervention" (European Commission 2025: n.p.). Further information about the automated translation process can be accessed here: https://commission.europa.eu/languages-our-websites/use-machine-translation-europa_en.



Figure 1. "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage (March 12, 2026)

The webpage presents ten commonly circulated myths about the EUDR (Figure 2), each followed by a corresponding "Reality" statement. These myths reflect concrete and widely expressed challenges articulated by diverse stakeholders across the globe (Berning *et al.* 2025: 3). For example, they include fears of excessive bureaucracy ("A mountain of paperwork"), concerns about protectionism ("A trade ban"), anxieties about competitiveness ("A death sentence for competitiveness"), doubts about the fairness of country risk classification, perceptions of insufficient consultation, worries about price increases, and apprehensions about the impact on smallholders, SMEs, due diligence procedures, and border controls. The list summarizes objections that have been raised in public debate and documented in academic and policy literature, providing the contextual foundation for the Commission's myth-busting intervention.

The ten myths addressed on the webpage can be summarized as follows:

a) Administrative Burden (Myth 1: "A mountain of paperwork") – concerns about the complexity and cost of due diligence requirements, particularly for SMEs and producers in developing countries (Judijanto 2025; Villiers 2022).

b) Commercial Prohibition (Myth 2: "A trade ban") – misinterpretations of the EUDR as a protectionist trade barrier (Ministry of Trade of Indonesia 2022).

c) Impact on Competitiveness (Myth 3: "A death sentence for competitiveness") – fears that compliance costs will undermine competitiveness, especially for operators unable to adapt quickly (European Commission 2020).

d) Fairness of Risk Classification (Myth 4: "Risk classification is unfair and outdated") – concerns that the methodology for classifying countries by deforestation risk may be outdated or biased (Gallemore *et al.* 2025).

e) Lack of Consultation (Myth 5: "The EU has not been listening") – perceptions among some groups that their concerns were not adequately addressed during the legislative process (Harrison and Paulini 2024).

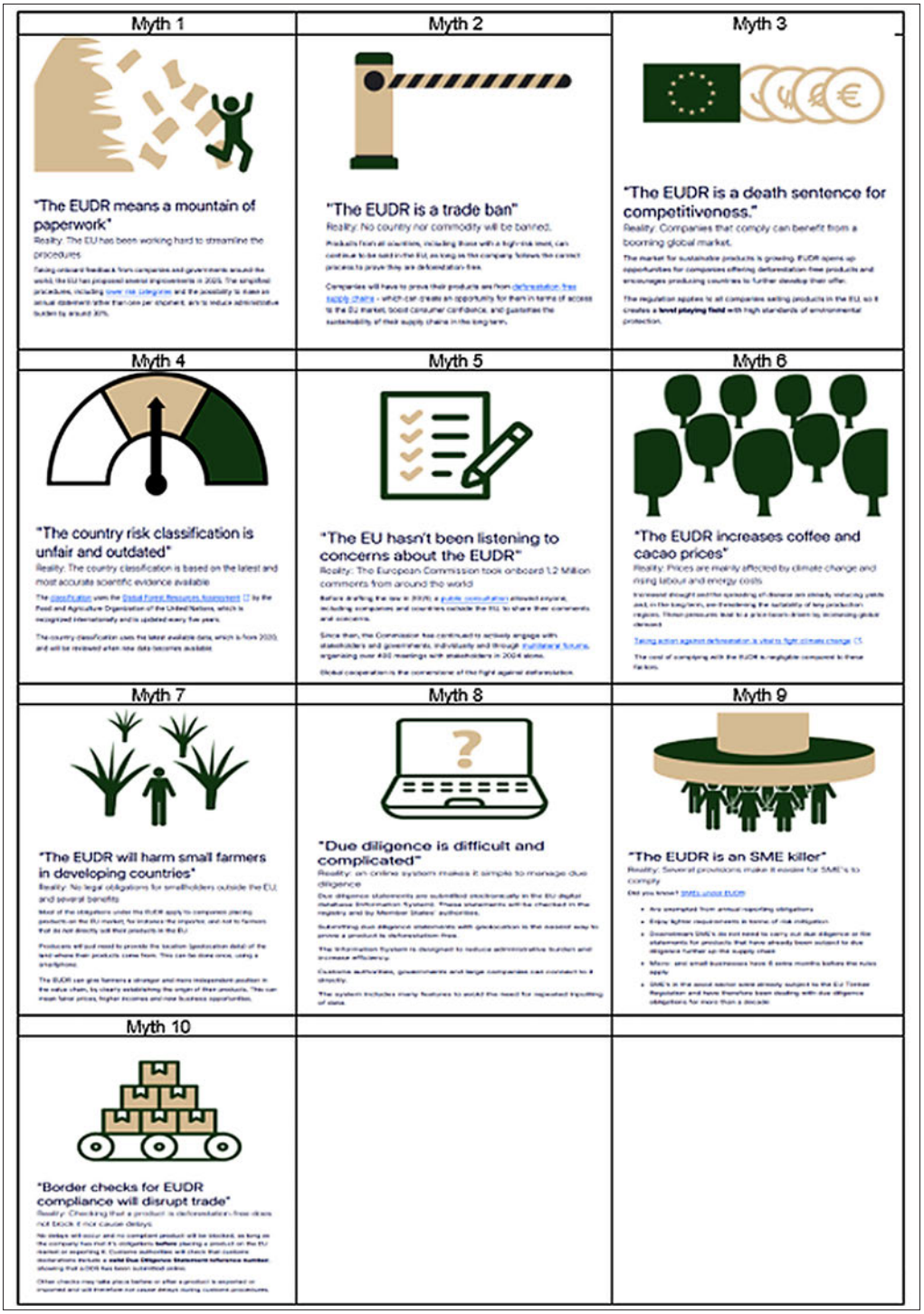

Figure 2. The 10 myths from the "EUDR Myth Buster" webpage (March 12, 2026)

f) Price Increases (Myth 6: "The EUDR increases coffee and cocoa prices") – fears that the EUDR will drive up commodity prices, despite evidence that climate-related factors are the primary drivers of volatility (Gilbert 2024; Cilas and Bastide 2020).

g) Harm to Smallholders (Myth 7: "The EUDR will harm small farmers") – concerns that small-scale farmers may lack the resources and digital literacy needed for compliance (Gneiting and Sonenshine 2018).

h) Difficulty of Due Diligence (Myth 8: "Due diligence is difficult and complicated") – anxieties about the technical demands of geolocation and verification systems (Solar *et al.* 2025).

i) Impact on SMEs (Myth 9: "A killer for SMEs") – fears that compliance costs will disproportionately affect smaller operators (EuroCommerce 2024).

l) Disruption of Border Controls (Myth 10: "It disrupts trade") – concerns that new customs checks will delay trade flows (Pauwelyn 2024).

By presenting these myths alongside concise "Reality" statements, the webpage seeks to mitigate anxieties, clarify regulatory requirements, and foster smoother implementation. The combination of visual and verbal resources is intended to make the information accessible to a broad audience, including non-experts and stakeholders with varying levels of familiarity with EU regulatory processes, in consideration of "the strict relationship existing between the community of users and the meaning representation of legal discourse" (Gotti and Williams 2010: 11) in the EU. The "Myth Buster" webpage thus constitutes a key component of the Commission's broader communication strategy for the EUDR.

3. Multilingual and Machine-translated communication in the EU

Multilingual communication is a defining feature of the European Union's institutional identity; it is essential for democratic legitimacy, transparency, and public participation. Yet the practical implementation of multilingualism is complex, particularly when the EU must communicate highly technical or politically sensitive policies such as the EUDR.

Communicating specialized regulatory content across such diverse groups requires balancing precision with accessibility. In an awareness of the language problems and the need to promote clarity (Williams 2011: 148), the EU has increasingly relied on digital communication strategies that combine simplification and multimodality. Multimodal strategies reflect broader trends in institutional communication, where visual and verbal resources co-construct meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; Baldry and Thibault 2006a; Sindoni 2013; Sindoni and Moschini 2021; Vasta 2001). However, the volume of material to be translated, combined with the need for rapid dissemination, has led to the increasing integration of MT into institutional workflows. Traditionally, MT has been subject to human correction (Hutchins 2002: 159, emphasis added):

> Many large organizations have large volumes of technical and administrative documentation that have to be translated into many languages. For many years, MT with human assistance has been a cost-effective option for multinational corporations and other multilingual bodies (e.g. *the European Union*).

But this is not the case for the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage, where the output of neural machine translation is directly offered to the user.

Neural machine translation (NMT)[5] systems such as the European Commission's eTranslation tool are trained on extensive multilingual corpora and are capable of producing fluent, contextually plausible output (Way 2019: 332). Their scalability makes them particularly attractive for institutional communication, where speed and efficiency are essential. Yet the use of MT in sensitive policy contexts raises important considerations. While MT can provide a general understanding of content, it may struggle with specialized terminology, idiomatic expressions, or register-specific nuances (O'Hagan and Ashworth 2002: 38). These limitations are especially relevant in domains such as environmental regulation, where precision is crucial. As has been noted (Adami and Pinto 2019: 71; Manzella 2025: 91-93), linguistic choices in institutional communication are never neutral: they contribute to constructing authority, legitimacy, and the perceived reliability of the message.

The EU explicitly acknowledges the limitations of its automated translation. Machine-translated webpages are accompanied by disclaimers indicating that the content is generated automatically (and may contain inaccuracies) and users are encouraged to consult the English version for authoritative information. This practice implicitly reinforces the epistemic primacy of English within the EU's digital communication ecosystem, positioning translated versions as provisional access points rather than fully equivalent texts. Such dynamics resonate with broader discussions on the evolving role of English as a transnational lingua franca in EU communication (Williams 2011: 146; Zollo 2024: 185).

The "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage exemplifies this communicative configuration. To access the Italian page, three distinct steps are necessary: (1) clicking on "EN"; (2) selecting the desired language (e.g. Italian); and (3) clicking on "Tradurre in italiano" (Translate into Italian) as the page displayed after Step 2 remains in English. The resulting Italian version is produced entirely through eTranslation and includes a prominent disclaimer inviting users to "return to the original language." This signals both transparency about the translation process and a recognition that automated output may not fully capture the nuances of the Source Text (ST). The implications of this configuration – particularly in relation to register, metaphor, and persuasive intent – are central to understanding how automated translation interacts with multimodal design in EU policy communication.

The next section examines these issues in detail by analysing the multimodal structure of the English webpage and the linguistic features of its Italian automated translation.

[5] "Neural machine translation is a new breed of corpus-based machine translation (also called data-driven or, less often, corpus-driven machine translation). It is trained on huge corpora of pairs of source language segments (usually sentences) and their translations, that is, basically from huge translation memories containing hundreds of thousands or even millions of translation units. In this sense, it is similar to the statistical machine translation technology that was the state of the art until very recently, but uses a completely different computational approach: neural networks (Forcada 2017: 293).

4. Analysis

4.1. Multimodal analysis of the English "Myth Buster" webpage

The "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage is organized around a highly regular and visually coherent structure that plays a central role in shaping the reader's engagement with the content. From a multimodal perspective, the webpage exemplifies what Baldry and Thibault (2006b: 177-180) describe as a "supercluster": a higher-level unit composed of multiple coordinated clusters, each functioning as a recognizable mini-genre. As shown in Figure 2, the page consists of ten clusters, each dedicated to a specific myth and its corresponding "Reality" statement. These clusters share the same chromatic palette, layout, and internal organization, creating a repeated pattern that guides the user through the content with minimal cognitive effort. The uniformity of these clusters – each comprising a visual element, a title, and a block of explanatory text – creates a predictable reading pathway that supports comprehension and reinforces the rhetorical purpose of the webpage. As Baldry and O'Halloran (2010: 187) also note, such clusters become the basic units with which users interact, shaping both navigation and meaning-making. Icons, illustrations, and simplified graphic representations are used to instantiate both the "myth" and the "reality," providing immediate visual cues that anchor the reader's interpretation. This aligns with Kress's (2010: 162) notion of 'multimodal orchestration', in which visual and verbal modes are coordinated to produce persuasive meaning. The icons are not decorative: they function as semiotic resources that frame the problem and its solution, reinforcing the intended reading of the text. The following examples (see Figure 2) analyse the relationship between visual elements and accompanying English texts, investigating how their interplay contributes to the construction of 'myth-busting' discourse.

a) "Mountain of paperwork" (Myth 1):

Visual: An icon depicting a tiny person dwarfed by a huge pile of documents, visually embodying overwhelming bureaucracy (myth), followed by a person leaping over a stack of papers, symbolizing overcoming the hurdle (reality).

Verbal: "The EUDR means a mountain of paperwork" (Myth);

"The EU has been working hard to streamline the procedures" (Reality).

This is a highly effective visual-verbal pairing. The image of bureaucratic overload is universally understood, directly reinforcing the "myth." The subsequent verbal resource illustrating how to overcome the obstacle powerfully supports the "reality" of streamlined procedures. The visual functions as a robust, non-linguistic anchor, solidifying the message regardless of subtle translational shifts. This reinforces a clear Problem-Solution (PS) pattern (Hoey 2001: 123), whereby a problem is posed ("The myth", instantiated both visually and verbally) followed by a solution to this misleading information ("Reality").

b) "Trade ban" (Myth 2):

Visual: an icon of a standard road barrier or checkpoint, raised to allow passage (for the reality statement). For the myth, the implication is a closed barrier.

Verbal: "The EUDR is a trade ban" (Myth); "No country nor commodity will be banned" (Reality).

The barrier gate icon visually encodes restriction, yet its green post subtly signals environmental legitimacy, undermining the notion of exclusion. It is to be noted that green can also be associated with hope (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002: 354). The term "ban" has strong prohibitive force, thus the multimodal texts under examination are shown to strategically construct and construe (Vasta 2024: 17) the initial myth of exclusion, thereby heightening the rhetorical impact of its subsequent textual refutation.

c) "The EUDR will harm small farmers" (Myth 7):

Visual: A stylized image of crops growing, with a small human figure standing among them, representing smallholders and their agricultural livelihood.

Verbal: "EUDR will harm small farmers in developing countries" (Myth); "No legal obligations for smallholders outside the EU, and several benefits" (Reality).

This visual directly depicts the *subject* of the myth – small farmers and their crops. Importantly, it does not visually endorse the "harm" but simply establishes the context. This is a common multimodal strategy in persuasive communication: illustrating the topic of concern while allowing the verbal text to provide the corrective or reassuring message (Song *et al.* 2022; Hameleers *et al.* 2020). The directness of the image helps to maintain focus on the vulnerable group discussed.

d) "Due diligence is difficult and complicated" (Myth 8)

Visual: A laptop screen displaying a large question mark, symbolizing confusion or uncertainty with digital processes.

Verbal : "Due diligence is difficult and complicated" (Myth); "An online system makes it simple to manage due diligence" (Reality).

The laptop with a question mark immediately visualizes the technical apprehension and complexity associated with digital compliance, directly aligning with the "myth". The subsequent text, explaining the online system as the "reality," gains immediate visual context and becomes more readily understandable.

The design of the webpage thus serves several functions simultaneously: it simplifies complex regulatory information; it guides the reader through a predictable rhetorical structure; it anchors interpretation through visual metaphors; it reinforces the authority of the "Reality" statements; it reduces cognitive load by providing consistent visual cues.

These features make the English webpage a compelling example of how multimodal resources can be mobilized to support institutional communication in a digital environment. They also provide the baseline against which the Italian automated translation must be evaluated, since any shift in verbal nuance interacts with a highly structured visual framework. The next subsection examines how the automated Italian translation aligns with – or diverges from – this multimodal configuration.

4.2. Analysis of the Italian automated translation

The Italian version of the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage is produced entirely through the European Commission's eTranslation system and is accompanied by a prominent disclaimer: *"Questa pagina è stata tradotta grazie alla traduzione automatica. Aiutaci a migliorare il nostro servizio rispondendo a due domande. Ritorna alla*

lingua originale (English)" ("This page has been translated using automatic translation. Help us improve our service by answering two questions. Return to the original language (English)"). This metalinguistic signal frames the translated text as a provisional aid rather than an authoritative version, implicitly reinforcing the primacy of the English ST.

Within this communicative configuration, the automated translation must be examined not only for semantic accuracy but also for its handling of register, metaphor, and institutional tone – elements that are central to the persuasive intent of the myth-busting discourse.

A close examination of selected expressions reveals several patterns characteristic of machine translation: semantic adequacy is generally maintained, but subtle shifts in nuance, idiomaticity, and pragmatic force emerge. These shifts, although individually minor, may cumulatively affect the clarity and rhetorical effectiveness of the message.

a) "Riscontri" for "Feedback"

English Version	Italian Version
Taking onboard *feedback* from companies and governments around the world, the EU has proposed several improvements in 2025	Prendendo in considerazione i *riscontri* delle imprese e dei governi di tutto il mondo, l'UE ha proposto diversi miglioramenti nel 2025

Table 1. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 1

The English term *feedback* in policy contexts typically denotes active input, reactions, or constructive criticism from stakeholders, implying a dynamic and participatory process. More generally, "policy feedback denotes the potential for policies to transform politics and, as a result, influence future courses of policy development" (Moynihan and Soss 2014: 321). While *riscontri* can, in certain contexts, approximate to "feedback," its primary meanings in Italian lean towards "findings," "results," "verifications," or "confirmation" (Gabrielli 2011). The choice of *riscontri* subtly shifts the meaning towards a more passive reception of established findings rather than an active engagement with diverse perspectives, potentially dampening the persuasive argument that the EU actively *listened* and EU stakeholders' opinions matter. Arguably, a more contextually appropriate translation in Italian would be *contributi*, *pareri,* or *osservazioni* ("contributions", "opinions", "observations"), which better capture the democratic nature of putting forward alternative views.

b) "Trade ban" → "Divieto commerciale"

English Version	Italian Version
The EUDR is a *trade ban*	L'EUDR è un *divieto commerciale*

Table 2. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 2

"Trade ban" in the EUDR myth context is used to express a fear of exclusion or market restriction – not to denote a literal embargo; it thus refers to a misconception, not an actual policy. The wording *divieto commerciale*, on the other hand, implies a formal and total prohibition, which may mislead readers into believing the EU has enacted a real ban. While the English metaphorical "ban" only evokes concern, the Italian *divieto* risks reinforcing that concern as fact. Translating 'trade ban' as *divieto commerciale* introduces a formal, legalistic tone that implies an actual prohibition, thereby distorting the original rhetorical intent. This can be seen as a case of "demetaphorisation", whereby "the metaphorical expression in the ST has been replaced by a more general expression in the target text" (Schäffner 2004b: 139). Such an approach is problematic especially in policy discourse, where nuance shapes institutional and societal power relations (Fairclough 1989: 163), public understanding and stakeholder response.

c) "Death sentence for competitiveness" → "Condanna a morte per la competitività"

English Version	Italian Version
EUDR is a *death sentence* for competitiveness	L'EUDR è una *condanna a morte* per la competitività

Table 3. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 3

In collocation with "competitiveness", the metaphorical expression 'death sentence' acquires the meaning of absolute ruin or inevitable failure. *Condanna a morte* is a literal translation of the English phrase. In Italian, a human translator might have chosen more naturally sounding alternatives such as *un colpo mortale per la competitività* (a fatal blow) or *la fine/morte della competitività* (the end/death of competitiveness) to maintain the appropriate register for a formal myth-busting exercise in keeping with the principle that "good translators implement fluent strategies: they avoid syntactical fragmentation, polysemy […] and shifts in *register*" (Venuti 2007: 59, emphasis added).

d) "Killer for SMEs" → "Killer per le PMI"

English Version	Italian Version
The EUDR is an SME *killer*	L'EUDR è un *killer* per le PMI

Table 4. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 9

The MT's literal transfer, while conveying the strong negative sentiment of the "myth," fails to adapt to the Target Text (TT)'s stylistic expectations for institutional communication. Figurative meanings are certainly employed in the intensification of processes (Martin and White 2005: 147). Yet the direct borrowing of the English word "killer" into Italian, while understandable, could have been rephrased as *un duro colpo per le PMI* (a hard blow for SMEs), *deleterio per le PMI* (deleterious for SMEs), or even *la rovina delle PMI* (the ruin of SMEs) as "the existence of experiential motivation does

not necessarily mean expressions will have identical uses in different languages" (Deignan and Potter 2004: 1250).

These examples, while generally allowing for comprehension, highlight that automated translation often prioritizes semantic transfer over stylistic nuance, idiomaticity, and register adaptation; it attempts to emulate human translators' decisions by learning patterns from large quantities of bilingual texts (Vieira 2018: 3), yet "there are also limitations for the neural models [like the EU's eTranslation] that cannot be overlooked and still need to be addressed" (Castilho *et al*. 2017: 108). In myth-busting policy communication, where persuasion, clarity, and authority are paramount, such inaccuracies, though subtle, can cumulatively weaken the message. This substantiates the EU's own implicit judgement, as conveyed by the "return to English" disclaimer, that the automated translation serves as a provisional access point, not an epistemically equivalent version. Particularly when using eTranslation to translate EU texts, it has been stressed (Somssich 2025: 118) that:

> AI could bring uniformity, provided that such uniformity is needed. Although not at the current level of sophistication of the tools, it can also help in time to create and suggest new words, offers [sic] alternatives. But the choice of what should be the authentic and official text is one of the people, and the responsibility lies with the institutions, ultimately with the EU.

e) "Boost consumer confidence" → "Aumentare la fiducia dei consumatori"

English Version	Italian Version
Companies will have to prove their products are from deforestation-free supply chains - which can create an opportunity for them in terms of access to the EU market, *boost consumer confidence*	Le imprese dovranno dimostrare che i loro prodotti provengono da catene di approvvigionamento a deforestazione zero, il che può creare loro un'opportunità in termini di accesso al mercato dell'UE, *aumentare la fiducia dei consumatori*

Table 5. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 2

The translation of "boost consumer confidence" as "*aumentare la fiducia dei consumatori*" is linguistically accurate but results in a significant attenuation of evaluative and promotional force. In English, *boost* carries a dynamic, upward-driving semantic prosody, evoking acceleration, stimulus, and economic momentum. By contrast, *aumentare* is semantically flatter, signalling quantitative growth without the market-oriented connotations embedded in the ST. Furthermore, the absence of the metaphor in Italian reduces the intended amplification of consumer trust, particularly given that metaphor in economic discourse is frequently employed with a persuasive function (McCloskey 1982; Charteris Black 2000). To restore the evaluative and persuasive force of the original, more appropriate alternatives could include "*dare un nuovo slancio alla fiducia dei consumatori*" or "*dare una spinta alla fiducia dei consumatori*".

f) "Mountain of paperwork" → "Montagna di scartoffie"

English Version	Italian Version
The EUDR means a mountain of *paperwork*	L'EUDR significa una montagna di *scartoffie*

Table 6. Example of ENG-to-ITA translation from Myth 1

The translation of "mountain of paperwork" as "*montagna di scartoffie*" introduces a shift in evaluative meaning at both metaphorical and lexical levels. While *mountain* already conveys excess and burden in English, *paperwork* remains relatively neutral, as this word is defined as "the part of a job that involves writing letters and reports and keeping records" (Cambridge Dictionary 2026, n.p.). In Italian, however, *scartoffie* adds an explicitly pejorative and colloquial tone, amplifying negativity and shifting the register. This can be seen as a case of overtranslation (Baker 1992); the result is a stronger, more anti-bureaucratic tone, which risks undermining the institutional intent.

More balanced alternatives would preserve neutrality, such as "*una montagna di adempimenti amministrativi*", or reduce metaphorical force altogether with "*un eccesso di oneri amministrativi*".

5. Discussion

The analysis of the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage shows how multimodal design and automated translation jointly influence public understanding of complex EU environmental regulation, supporting the claim that "twenty-first century literacy requires the ability to analyse critically the multimodal meaning-making practices we encounter every day in contemporary culture" (Vasta and Baldry 2020: 7). The integration of "verbal caption and visual image" (Baldry and Thibault 2008: 30) into repeated clusters reduces cognitive load and enhances accessibility. Familiar visual metaphors – mountains of paperwork, trade barriers, small farmers, digital confusion – anchor interpretation, enabling visual and verbal modes to fulfil "two strategic steps fulfilling shared needs and solving common problems by engaging and connecting with the audience" (Vasta 2022: 237). This reflects a broader shift towards visually-driven communication for multilingual audiences.

Automated translation, however, limits the effectiveness of this strategy. The Italian version remains intelligible but shows issues of register, metaphor handling, idiomaticity, and terminological precision. Renderings such as *riscontri* for *feedback*, *divieto commerciale* for *trade ban*, and *killer per le PMI* weaken the rhetorical force of the myth-busting approach. Since the page seeks to clarify misconceptions and instil trust in institutional authority (van Leeuwen 2007: 92), these nuances matter. As Doherty (2016: 947) observes, knowledge is often confined "within language silos," and translation choices can either foreground or downplay the EU's democratic image (Constantinou 2019: 203).

The webpage's disclaimer encouraging readers to "return to the original language (English)" highlights this asymmetry. While presented as transparency, such a move

implicitly constructs English as epistemically superior (Modiano 2017: 375; see also Seidlhofer 2011), positioning machine-translated texts as merely provisional. This dynamic is difficult to reconcile with the EU's commitment to multilingual equality: automated translation increases reach, but simultaneously reinforces English-mediated meaning.

Despite these challenges, the visual layer significantly aids comprehension. Visual cues offer immediate orientation even when the translated verbal text lacks precision. For non-expert readers, images function as cognitive scaffolding that "regulates the flow of information within the learner's working memory, thereby reducing cognitive load" (van Nooijen *et al*. 2024: 36). The page thus provides an accessible entry point to the EUDR, though the Italian version supports rather than replaces engagement with the English original.

The case aligns with broader research showing how digital platforms bridge gaps between expert regulatory discourse and non-expert publics (Bondi and Cacchiani 2021: 119; Ravazzani and Maier 2017: 510). Effective communication with non-specialists requires rethinking "the roles of participants, their communicative purposes, and their existing knowledge" (Xia 2022: 71). While the EUDR webpage exemplifies persuasive, visually anchored public information design, it also reveals limitations: it responds to misconceptions but does not engage with broader socio-economic dimensions of the EUDR, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Vasta 2024; Manzella 2025), smallholder inclusion, or long-term sustainability transitions.

Moreover, the site foregrounds policies and institutional perspectives rather than people, raising questions about whether the multimodal approach merely constitutes political spin, echoing longstanding concerns about public disengagement. As Williams and Milizia (2008: 2) note, debates on the "unreadability of the EU Constitution" reflect wider efforts to bring "the language of EU officialdom […] closer to the citizen and not just the domain of specialists."

Finally, the sustainability dimension prompts reflection on how visual elements might be more effectively integrated into legal documents themselves (Williams 2023: 178-187), moving beyond the defensive use of visuals seen here. Article 11 of the EUDR emphasizes that "enhanced Union action is needed" to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), supported by Member State endorsement of initiatives such as the UN Decade of Action for the SDGs, the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and the UN Decade of Family Farming. If sustainability is to remain central to EU regulatory practice, multimodal communication must evolve into more integrated, multilingual, and participatory models.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the "EUDR – Myth Buster" webpage represents an important step in the European Commission's efforts to communicate a highly complex regulation to a diverse public. By examining both its multimodal design and the automated Italian translation, the analysis highlights how the Commission is attempting to balance clarity, accessibility, and speed of dissemination within the constraints of its multilingual environment. However, this analysis also highlights that sustainability carries cross-cultural, socio-cultural, and socio-economic implications, shaping

how diverse communities perceive, experience, and are affected by policies such as the EUDR.

At the same time, the findings indicate that automated translation – despite its usefulness – cannot yet guarantee the level of nuance and precision required in strategic policy communication, and that the epistemic hierarchy implicitly established through the "return to English" disclaimer remains problematic for an institution committed to linguistic equality. More broadly, the case suggests that improving public understanding of the EUDR requires approaches that extend beyond myth-correction alone. Ensuring that stakeholders across linguistic and cultural contexts can meaningfully engage with EU environmental policy will depend on combining reliable translation practices with communication strategies that are transparent, participatory, and sensitive to the socioeconomic implications of the Regulation. In this sense, the current webpage can be seen as a transitional tool: effective in countering misinformation but also indicative of the need for more robust, multilingual, and inclusive communication models as the EUDR continues to unfold.

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VISUAL STORYTELLING AND THE POLITICAL HERO IN THE AGE OF DIS-/MISINFORMATION: A CMDA APPROACH

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Abstract

This article examines the role of visual storytelling in the construction and manipulation of political heroism in the contemporary post-truth era, characterized by disinformation, misinformation, and highly polarized digital communication. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and extending it to a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework, the study investigates how verbal and visual resources interact to frame political leaders as heroic figures and to shape public opinion. The analysis is grounded in the concepts of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, framing, positioning, and Intertextual Thematic Formations (ITFs), and foregrounds the ideological functions of master narratives, myths, and cultural archetypes. Focusing on two paradigmatic case studies from U.S. politics – the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in July 2024 and George W. Bush's self-legitimation during the War on Terror – the article shows how images and narratives are remediated across media platforms to monumentalize political leaders as resilient, divinely sanctioned, or morally righteous heroes. Through detailed multimodal readings of iconic photographs, media covers, political speeches, and historical artworks (notably Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*), the study demonstrates how ideological positions are strategically naturalized, power asymmetries obscured, and boundaries between fact and fabrication blurred. The article argues that visual media do not merely document political events but actively construct reality by mobilizing emotional appeal, aestheticization, and moral polarization. By revealing how political storytelling exploits archetypal narrative structures and cultural myths such as the American Dream and American Exceptionalism, the study highlights the urgency of developing critical multimodal literacy as a key civic competence. Ultimately, the paper contributes to scholarship on political communication by showing how CMDA can expose the hidden mechanisms through which post-truth narratives legitimize power and manipulate collective belief.

1. Introduction

As the blurb of Philip Seargeant's (2022) *The Art of Political Storytelling* has it, in our post-truth[1] world "tapping into people's emotions has proved far more effective than rational argument – and […] the most powerful tool for manipulating emotions is

[1] The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 was "post-truth" meaning "relating to, or denoting

a gripping narrative". In their capacity to give order to chaos and spot coherence in the fragmentation of everyday life, narratives shape human knowledge and give meaning to personal experiences (Schachtner 2020: 33):

> Narratives take place in the present, feed on the past, and point to the future. They encompass both individual and collective elements. […] As cultural practices and life forms in time and space, storytelling gains in importance for the I and the You in equal measure.

As Bruner (1990: 77) convincingly argues, narrative is "one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication", whose identifying features are:

a) "its inherent sequentiality" (*ibid.*: 43), which gives meaning to its constituents;

b) the fact that narrative "can be 'real' or 'imaginary' without loss of its power as a story" (*ibid.*: 44);

c) the fact that "it specializes in forging links between the exceptional and the ordinary" (*ibid.*: 47) inasmuch as "the function of a story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern" (*ibid.*: 49); and finally,

d) dramatism, by which Bruner (*ibid.*: 50) means its focus on "deviations from the canonical that have moral consequences […whereby] stories must necessarily relate to what is morally valued".

But narrative is also a way of using verbal and non-verbal language "strategically", in the technical (military and geopolitical) sense, i.e. to "influence the attitudes and opinions of targeted audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives" (Farwell 2012: xviii-xix). In our post-truth era, *disinformation* – i.e. information specifically fabricated (e.g. conspiracy theories or rumours) and intentionally designed to manipulate – abounds. Moreover, information is increasingly disintermediated, i.e. made accessible by virtually anybody through digital communication and social media platforms without the filter of gatekeepers (like journalists and, more generally, media industries), and thus potentially more subject, however accidentally, to becoming *misinformation*. A third, equally disquieting scenario occurs in the case of *malinformation*, which is based on reality (or truthful information) which is, however, used out of context, manipulated, or leaked to inflict harm on a person (e.g. as is the case with revenge porn), organization, or country[2].

Fake news and disinformation have always been the staple ingredients of traditional warfare, but are enormously amplified, normalized and legitimated in the context of highly polarized, disintermediated communication in the digital landscape (Sehl 2024), wherein information is typically confined within the controlled communicative

circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=it&lang=en&). See also Newman and Conrad (2024).

[2] See Wardle (2020) and Maci *et al.* (2024: 1-4) for a detailed discussion of the differences between disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, and fake news. See https://library.csi.cuny.edu/misinformation/mis-dis-mal for pedagogic tools and a guide to thinking critically about information sources developed by the Research Center at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

environment of information (or epistemic) bubbles and echo chambers[3] inhabited by like-minded people, with little or no access to platforms for fact-checking or debunking fake news. Besides, with the ever-increasing pervasiveness of the Internet and social media platforms, communication is increasingly multimodal, calling for new and more complex skills to interpret the synergic interplay of verbal and non-verbal meaning-making resources. The latter are constantly *remediated*[4], and consequently *resemiotized* (Iedema 2003: 41), across different contexts and platforms (Schachtner 2020: 21):

> Media change the forms and locations of narrating. […] Digital media are driving forward the deterritorialization of narrating, displacing experiences, interpretations, ideas, and values in the process.

Such deterritorialization and displacement may go as far as veritable *détournement* (rerouting), which often involves "culture jamming", a strategy that "strip[s] away the usual symbolism associated with certain images, icons, logos, and labels in order to undermine hyperreal narratives of the good(s) life [i.e. capitalism]" (Moser 2023: 201). Such is the case, for instance, with the various remediations and reroutings of the Statue of Liberty to stigmatize and subvert the hyperreal "invasion" metanarrative justifying numerous crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Trump administration (Moser 2025: 8). Among these reroutings is Judith de Leeuw's 2025 mural in Roubaix, France (Figure 1a), remindful of Gee Vaucher's 1989 gouache and pencil on paper "Oh, America" (Figure 1b) – originally commissioned for the cover of the 1989 Tackhead album *Friendly as a Hand Grenade*[5] – which was repurposed and resemiotized when it went viral on social media as an anti-Trump meme in the aftermath of the 2016 (and, then again, 2024) presidential election and was even reproduced on the *Daily Mirror* front page (Figure 1c).

In such a fluid context, not only has journalism been increasingly shifting towards image centricity (Stöckl 2020), but the manipulation of public debate and public opinion has become a tangible and constant threat, especially so in the light of Meta's recent decision to "stop using third-party fact-checkers [to curtail the spread of misinformation across its social media apps] and instead rely on users to add notes to posts" (Isaac

[3] "An epistemic bubble is a social epistemic structure [of community formation] in which some relevant voices have been excluded through omission. Epistemic bubbles can form with no ill intent […], but when we also use [them] as sources of news, then we impose on ourselves a narrowed and self-reinforcing epistemic filter, which leaves out contrary views and illegitimately inflates our epistemic self-confidence. An echo chamber, on the other hand, is a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited" (Nguyen 2020: 142) and which fosters not only the polarization of opinions but, most importantly, the spreading of misinformation and disinformation.

[4] In Bolter and Grusin's (1999) terms, remediation is the transposition and consequent re-construal, at a metalevel of storytelling, of the original "voices" through a different medium, including the affordances that have arisen with social media as a news- and opinion-making source. Borrowing Bolter's (2000: 62) words, "remediation operates according to two representational strategies. The first, which is 'transparent immediacy', attempts to erase or conceal the process of remediation by making the medium invisible. Linear-perspective painting since the Renaissance, most photography, and the Hollywood film style all pursue transparent immediacy. The second strategy, which is 'hypermediacy', calls attention to the process of remediation by acknowledging or highlighting the medium itself". See also Vasta (2023a: 10-11, 356-363 *et passim*).

[5] See https://thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk/2016/11/10/gee-vauchers-oh-america-daily-mirror-front-page.



Figure 1. a) "The Statue of Liberty's Silent Protest" (2025); b) "Oh America" (1989); c) Daily Mirror front page (Nov. 10, 2016)



Figure 2. A Russian protester arrested in Nizhny Novgorod for showing a blank sign (*La Repubblica*, Instagram post, March 13, 2022)

and Schleifer 2025). Similarly, as Myers (2025) points out in his *New York Times* article, Meta is "turn[ing] a blind eye to a flood of low-quality or deceptive content, spam and in some cases outright fraud" spread by companies that were among the top political advertisers on Facebook through thousands of AI-generated videos, scams and fabricated Facebook feeds of politicians and White House officials, among whom Myers includes Bernie Sanders and Karoline Leavitt.

It appears, therefore, vital to take on a critical stance, in both propaganda and fair practices of consensus-raising, towards the interplay of different visual-verbal narratives (with images – even blank images, as in Figure 2 – and/or silence often speaking louder than words) used to reinforce, or conversely dismantle, public opinion's perceptions of some given events and actions: in these respects, Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA, e.g. Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 2023; Fairclough 2001, 2003; Hodge and Kress 1993; van Dijk 2008) and the notion of "framing" (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974, 1981; Gordon and Tannen 2023; van Dijk 2023), or "positioning" (Davies and Harré 1990; Vasta and Caldas Coulthard 2009), appear to be particularly fitting when extended to the study of multimodal (viz. visual) storytelling, especially so in political and photojournalistic discourse

(e.g. Dahmen and Thomson 2026; Machin and Polzer 2015; White 2014) and in the context of digital communication and remediation.

In its analysis of visual storytelling across cultures, the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the Critical Multimodal Discourse analytical approach to, and objectives of, the investigation, identifying two key research questions: firstly, how the political hero's identity and role is constructed multimodally and monumentalized ideologically through the workings of intertextuality and interdiscursivity; secondly, how the political hero's self-legitimization as a superempowered protector of the Nation is sustained and normalized through the fabrication of truth, which can only be unveiled by critical multimodal discourse analysis. In these respects, Section 3 discusses three archetypal, interlinked examples taken from different cultures, highlighting recurrent archetypes and master narratives. Section 4 addresses the second research question by investigating a paradigmatic example of the workings of verbal allusions and visual propaganda. Finally, but by no means less importantly, Section 5 highlights the pedagogical and cross-cultural implications of critical multimodal competence as a key civic competence.

2. Methodological approach and scope of the analysis

In Fowler's (1996: 4) definition,

> CDA insists that all representation is mediated, moulded by the value-systems that are ingrained in the [verbal and visual meaning-making resources] used for representation; it challenges common sense by pointing out that something could have been represented some other way with a very different significance. This is not, in fact, simply a question of 'distortion' or 'bias': there is not necessarily any true reality that can be unveiled by critical practice, there are simply relatively varying representations.

In other words, CDA "investigate[s] which options are chosen in which institutional and social contexts, and why these choices should have been taken up, what interests are served by them, and what purposes achieved" (van Leeuwen 1996: 43). More specifically, a CDA-oriented approach tends to prioritize two crucial constructs:

a) the "ideological complex", i.e. "a deeply contradictory set of versions of reality whose contradictions are intrinsic to […] manag[ing…] the competing interests [the locutor is] trying to satisfy" (Hodge and Kress 1993: 157): this is manifested in discourse, for instance, by euphemistic/dysphemistic uses of language (or images, for that matter), like juxtaposing the "collateral damage" caused by "our" missiles and the "civilian casualties" caused by "theirs" (*ibid.*: 162);

b) the "ideological square", i.e. "an in-group/out-group polarization which emphasizes Our good things and Their bad things, and de-emphasizes (mitigates, or even hides) Our bad things and Their good things" (van Dijk 2008: 130)[6]. Such polarization is the norm in social media communication contexts.

[6] For a reappraisal of this construct within the wider, more flexible notions of "interactions in discourse" and "clusters of ideologies", see van Dijk 2024. For an analysis of the workings of the ideological square with specific reference to misinformation discourse on social media, see Hamdi 2024.

Against this backdrop, and banking on the well-attested view that "multimodal communication is just as capable of distorting or misrepresenting power relationships and enacting social inequalities as verbal language is now accepted to be" (Bateman 2019: 531), the present paper will carry out a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis – i.e. a critical analysis of multimodal discourse, henceforth CMDA[7] – to investigate:

a) how specific Intertextual Thematic Formations (henceforth, ITFs) – i.e. "a community's recurrent saids and dones, [as well as] the semiotic resources for saying and doing" (Lemke 1988: 32) – and strategies of visual-verbal (re)framing are used to construct heteroglossic relations of alliance and opposition (*ibid.*: 40, 48 *et passim*) and to underpin the political hero's identity, positioning, and mission; and, consequently, how the political hero's identity performance and journey/mission – as detailed, for instance, in Campbell (2008) – are monumentalized by invoking specific master narratives (Bamberg 2005)[8], viz. that of the 'celebration-of-stability/[self-]celebration' (Vasta 2001; 2023a), or 'coronation' (Dayan and Katz 1992);

b) how myths, cultural constructs (viz. the American Dream and American Exceptionalism[9]) and fabricated truths are manipulated not simply to promote and/or perform political identities but, more importantly, to shape and manipulate public opinion – in other words, how disinformation and polarized ('us' v. 'them', i.e. 'good' v. 'bad'/'order' v. 'disorder') narratives are used in visual storytelling as a propaganda weapon, for example in order to deny historical truths or rewrite controversial facts (e.g. Black slavery, war outcomes, or Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs).

As regards the first research question, the focus will be on the workings of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1995: 134) in the media's visual-verbal ideological construction of the identity and role of the political hero – here, Donald Trump, with specific reference to his attempted assassination on July 14, 2024, and G.W. Bush, in his management of the 2003 Gulf War, as, respectively, "the chosen" and "the decider": this strategy consists in visually and/or verbally inscribing or invoking, through explicit or implicit intertextual references to cultural *topoi* and artifacts, positive Affect or Judgement[10] (Martin and White 2005) concerning the positionings and roles of the political hero – as "the revolutionary", "the rebel", or "the insurgent", as the case may

[7] As opposed to MCDA, where the emphasis is on "multimodal work in critical discourse studies" (Machin 2016: 322; see also Machin 2013), or on "doing critical discourse studies with multimodality" (Ledin and Machin 2019: 497).

[8] Master narratives are "pre-existent (or transhistorical) sociocultural forms of interpretation" (Bamberg 2005) which are embedded in, and rely on narrative systems, made up of story forms, scripts/schemata, and archetypes (e.g. the hero and the villain), and which "provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations" (Halverson *et al.* 2011: 7).

[9] The literature on the American Dream, as well as on the related key notions of American Exceptionalism, enshrined in the Puritan Jeremiad, and of what Sacvan Bercovitch (2012: 68 *et passim*) refers to as "sacred secularization", is virtually boundless: sociolinguistic (viz. SFL- and CDA-oriented) studies, in Italy and abroad, besides Bayley and Miller's (1993) seminal volume, are, e.g., Ross (1991: 22-50); Miller 2006; and Vasta (2023a: 48-51, 170-174, 270 *et passim*).

[10] In Martin and White's (2005: 42-61) Appraisal Theory, Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are resources for evaluating the system of Attitude in terms of, respectively: feelings and emotions like in/security, un/happiness, dis/inclination; social behaviour, esteemed or sanctioned with reference to normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity and propriety; evaluation of things and artifacts, assessed in terms of impact, quality, balance, composition, reaction and valuation. For the distinction between directly *inscribed* vs implicitly *invoked* meanings, see Martin and White 2005: 61-68, and Footnote 16 below.

be –, who is pursuing a noble/sacred mission in the name of a superior, legitimizing entity (here, God) or universally shared values (here, Liberty).

As regards the second research question, the analysis will highlight the manipulation of public opinion to construct relations of alliance and opposition[11] to normalize and impose 'new' (anti- or counter-) narratives (Bamberg 2004) over dominant (or master-) narratives. This is done by shaping and creating alternative frames and contexts for interpretation in which the boundaries between truth and fake news may easily be blurred and in which "ideological common sense" (Fairclough 2001: 84) is naturalized and legitimated in order to sustain power asymmetries, as well as to distort, marginalize or even silence minority voices.

"Politics is [inherently and] increasingly a textual practice" (Jones 2005: 18), a multimodal and co-creative process of meaning-making which, in the discursive context of US politics, is ideologically rooted in the sociocultural tradition of the American Dream. For our present purposes – i.e. the investigation of myths and fabricated truths to promote and/or perform political identities, not simply to shape but to manipulate public opinion –, and within the limits of a research article, we shall frame the American Dream against the backdrop of American Exceptionalism and with reference to the two paradigmatic cases of D.J. Trump and G.W. Bush.

3. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the post-truth era: monumentalizing the political leader

As a preliminary consideration in the analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, it must be noted that master narratives (and related story forms, frames, scripts and archetypes) typically sustain and nourish what has been referred to above as ITFs, i.e. common ways of speaking of the same things in the same manner; at the same time, ITFs may be challenged – in the community's languaging practices as one of the building blocks of identity performance (see Vasta 2023b) – by counter- or anti-narratives (Bamberg 2004) resisting and/or reversing the dominant ideological status quo.

The world-famous *Time* cover of Figure 3a (left) reproduces a fragment from a photo by Associated Press photographer Evan Vucci, who captured Donald Trump moments after surviving the assassination attempt on July 14, in the heat of the 2024 presidential race (see the subheadline "Former president survives shooting with nation on edge"). On the right (Figure 3b) is the equally iconic *Newsweek* extra edition cover portraying 'the mother of all attacks', i.e. 9/11, which was framed as, and indeed was, the first attack on America's homeland in peacetime history and a sign that, on that day, 'the world has changed'. What is remarkable, from an intertextual and interdiscursive perspective, is that the ITF of 'Attack on X'/'X under attack' is not underpinned, in both cases, by the vulnerability master narrative, as would be natural to assume under the circumstances, and especially so in Trump's case since, if an attack is mounted against a would-be president, America itself is under attack, again: in actual fact, what

[11] This is akin to the distinction between alignment and disalignment (or alienation) in the Appraisal system of Engagement (Martin and White 2005: 95). For a thorough analysis of G.W. Bush's discourse strategies of Engagement with specific reference to the speech he gave to the UN on September 12, 2002 to persuade his hearers to wage war against Iraq, see Miller 2004.



Figure 3. Same ITF, different ideological orientations (3a. resilience versus 3b. vulnerability)

emerges from the *Time* cover, at both verbal and non-verbal levels, is vulnerability's counter-narrative, i.e. resilience – ultimately nourishing Trump's 'self-celebration' as 'the chosen', a *topos* to which we shall return shortly.

At the verbal level, apart from the word "attack" itself, the most evident allusion to 9/11 in the subheadline of Figure 3a is the idea that "the nation [is] on edge". Once more, after 9/11, America risks becoming inward-looking, and focused on its domestic vulnerability; but precisely because: a) the nation needs reassurance in the face of danger; and b) fighting against America's vulnerability is what underpins Trump's MAGA campaign message, which risks backfiring in the present circumstances (inasmuch as Trump metonymically was, and might be again, America itself), the attack needs to be reframed as the hero's successful display of resilience in the face of trial, while his "surviv[ing] shooting" is the hero's victory, namely the reason for monumentalizing the political leader.

On the non-verbal plane, with blood on his face and ear, his fist raised in the air, Trump stands in defiance, 'towering' against the sky and metaphorically and literally propped up by his bodyguards. The masterly multimodal orchestration[12] in Figure 4a identifies a triangle (or, more specifically, a human pyramid), whose vertex coincides with the ideal point of contact between Trump's fist and the US flag, and which can be defined (in Kress and van Leeuwen's 2006 terms) as a double triptych (identified by the two horizontal and the two vertical lines). Such an orchestration constructs Trump as

[12] I.e. "the process of assembling/organizing/designing a plurality of signs into a particular configuration to form a coherent arrangement", with an emphasis on the 'semiotic harmony' of the resultant ensembles and their 'aptness' to "meet the rhetor's [or text organizer's] interests" (Kress 2010: 162). On text-image relations, see also Bateman 2014 and Baldry and Thibault 2006.

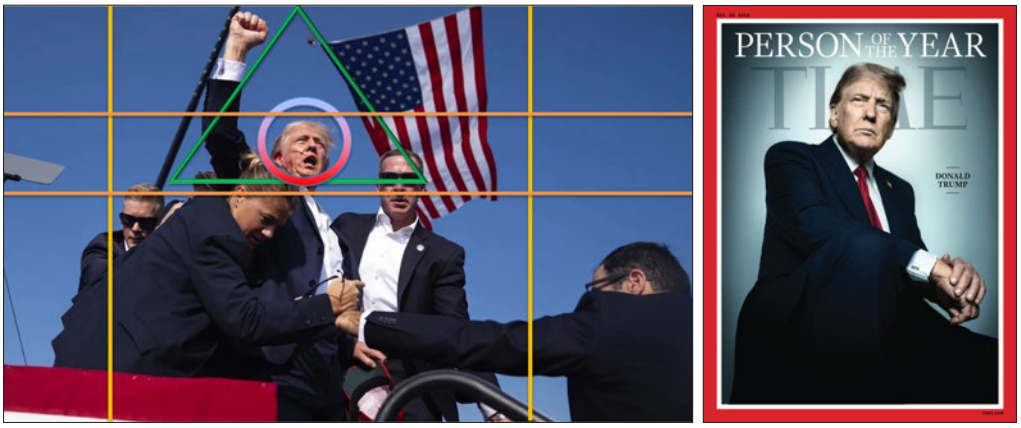

Figure 4. a) The multimodal orchestration of Trump's "mission"; b) Trump's (self-)celebration

the Mediator (in the circle) between the ontological space of the Ideal, or symbolic information (i.e. the victory gesture and the US flag) and that of the Real information, represented by the concrete threat and the bodyguards' effort to protect the hero against that threat. Furthermore, constructing Trump as the Reacter in a 'non-transactional reaction' – whereby "an eyeline vector emanates from […] the Reacter, but does not point at another participant" (*ibid.*: 74), let alone the viewer – transforms the visual, at the interpersonal level of discourse, into an "offer", rather than a "demand picture" (*ibid.*: 119-124)[13], one that should be beheld in awe as a result of the low camera angle placing the viewer in a hierarchically inferior position. This is also the case, incidentally, with the self-celebratory image on the cover of *Time* magazine of Dec. 30, 2024, featuring Trump as "Person of the Year" (Figure 4b).

Vucci's photograph – shared, remediated across different channels and platforms and instantly iconic – was immediately appropriated by political allies and opponents alike. For critics, it was stagecraft, or spectacle – calculated, theatrical, and disturbing in its resonance with authoritarian imagery. For supporters, it became visual proof of near-martyrdom, a Christ-like survival, a heroic leader who bleeds for his Nation and has been saved to fulfil a sacred mission, as Trump himself was to declare solemnly[14] in his Inaugural Address of January 20, 2025, which he called "Liberation Day".

Be that as it may, in the history of visual culture, certain images transcend documentation and become emblems, i.e. tools in the shaping of collective memory and national myths. The analogies between Vucci's photograph and Géricault's 1819 *Raft*

[13] In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006: 250) terms, "'demand' pictures [are those] from which represented participants address the viewer directly with their gaze and 'want something from the viewer', and 'offer' pictures [are those] which position the viewer as an observer only, and offer the represented participants as 'information' to be taken in by the viewer".

[14] "Over the past eight years, I have been tested and challenged more than any other president in our 250-year history. […] Those who wish to stop our cause have tried to take my freedom and indeed to take my life. […] An assassin's bullet ripped through my ear, but I felt then, and believe even more so now, that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNArBr_J8mA; quotes at 6'13", 6'31", and 6'43", respectively).



Figure 5. a) Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819); b) Delacroix's *Liberty Guides the People* (1830); c) Attempted assassination of Trump (Vucci, 2024, Associated Press)

of the Medusa (Figure 5a), on the one hand, and Eugène Delacroix's 1830 romantic painting *Liberty Guides the People* (Figure 5b), on the other, are striking and offer a powerful lens through which to examine the intertextual ties within, and consequent manipulability of, master narratives.

Firstly, Delacroix's painting in itself recalls the classically-inspired pyramidal composition of the "human wave" also found in Géricault's masterpiece, which illustrates a makeshift raft carrying 150 people after the wreck of a French ship, but reverses it, on the interpersonal plane, by opting for a frontal, not backside, view which enhances the viewer's engagement as an observer, not simply of the event but also of the represented participants' attitudes. As a good case in point of sheer misinformation, Delacroix's painting was not a depiction of the 1789 Revolution in France, as is commonly misbelieved, but, even more tellingly for our present purposes, that of "the three-day uprising of July 1830 when Parisians took to the streets to defend their freedoms – that of the press in particular – from the tyrannical rule of Charles X" (https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/visitor-trails/the-louvre-s-masterpieces/romanticism-topicality-sensuality). "Liberty", a mythical embodiment of freedom, is outrageously[15] personified as a sensual, bare-breasted woman of the people, holding the tricolour flag and a bayonet rifle, who steps over the bodies of the fallen as she leads forward "the people", made up of individuals from all walks of life and social classes. This perfect blend of documentary and symbolic elements serves to sustain the master narrative of a popular uprising not as a moment of chaos, but as a glorious, righteous struggle for liberty. In the painter's artistic remediation and consequent reframing (viz. 'romanticizing') of the historical event, violence and chaos are elevated into virtue and heroism, thus producing an "ideological complex" (Hodge and Kress 1993).

However, the parallels with Delacroix in Evan Vucci's iconic picture are not limited to compositional, iconographic features. Both images are saturated with symbolic potential. Both feature a protagonist framed as the embodiment of a cause and the

[15] "When it was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1831, Delacroix's painting scandalized both the public and critics […mainly because] the woman's physical appearance […] incorporated elements of heightened realism […] – for example, the hair under her arms. In the conventional classicist and academic representation of the nude, rigorously idealized, body hair was prohibited; at most, a hint of pubic hair was tolerated in male nudes. […] Liberty was described as 'disgusting', an 'ignoble woman', a 'Venus of the streets', and was compared to […] one of those 'shameless peripatetics whose swarms in the evening cover the boulevards'" (my own translation from https://www.artesvelata.it/liberta-guida-popolo-delacroix/).

personification of resistance and stamina. And crucially, both are open to manipulation. In Delacroix's time, the painting, originally inspired by a contemporary event, contributed to the romantic myth of the French revolution, even though the political outcomes were far less idealistic. Vucci's photograph, though journalistic, instantly entered the realm of myth-making. Within hours, it was remediated and reframed into memes, propaganda posters, and patriotic tributes. Like Delacroix's *Liberty*, whose fortunes have transcended its original context and transformed it into the epitome of every legitimate demand for freedom and equality, the image of Trump became more than an image – it became a narrative device, at least for those who exploited the underlying ideological complex and transformed violent disruption into patriotism so as to monumentalize the man and glorify survival.

Pieces of art or photographs, appearing in print, electronic, or digital media become iconic when (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 27):

> [they] are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of genres, media, or topics.

In other words, any such visual text (in its synergic interplay with the verbal discourses within, and about it) becomes iconic when it "has transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context and meaning" (Kemp 2012: 3) and it serves to decode reality, i.e. when reality imitates art, and not vice versa. Such is the case not just with Vucci's shot of the attempted assassination, but also with another photograph (see Figure 6) which went viral on the Internet in 2018: it portrays a twenty-year-old guy named Aed Abu Amro who, unlike 208 young boys like him, survived the 13th attempt by Palestinians at forcing the Gaza blockade imposed by Israel. Being perceptually the most salient participant in the visual composition, as a result of central position, chromatic contrast and agentive role, the boy is undoubtedly remindful, in posture and half-nakedness, of Delacroix's *Liberty*, conveying the same universal feeling of rebellion against the denial and usurpation of rights. And, although positive feelings (Affect: +security) and moral esteem (Judgement: t- +propriety) are, respectively, visually inscribed and invoked as token (t)[16] in the image, we contend that the everlasting impact of this visual piece of news does not reside exclusively in the ideologically noble, yet martyr-like attempt to enforce liberty from a disadvantaged, objectively inferior position – or, borrowing Bednarek and Caple's (2017: 107-133) taxonomy, in its values of "positivity" (i.e. heroism), "personalization" (i.e. the singling-out of the main protagonist), and "superlativeness" (i.e. the large impact and scope of the event). Rather, the image's impact is also a function of its "aesthetic appeal", i.e. the construction of this event and its protagonist as "beautiful", inasmuch as visual "composition creates tension and stimulates the eye to resolve the potential imbalance between […] differently weighted elements in the frame […] resulting [in] dynamic asymmetry" (Bednarek and Caple 2017: 110).

[16] In Martin and White's (2005: 75-76) Appraisal Theory, a "token" of appraisal (tagged "t") is a stretch of text which evokes, instead of explicitly inscribing in the text itself, a certain meaning, evaluation or response in a community.



Figure 6. Mustafa Hassouna's shot of Aed Abu Amro protesting against Israel's blockade of Gaza (2018, Anadolu Agency) *

* https://www.lemonde.fr/photo/article/2018/10/26/la-photo-d-un-manifestant-a-gaza-devient-une-icone_5375063_4789037.html. Note that *Le Monde* article explicitly remarks the resemblance with Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* and mentions another viral photo recalling the same masterpiece, by Martin Argyroglo who shot people in Paris on January 11, 2016, who protested against the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher store.

To draw a provisional conclusion from the intertextual and interdiscursive analysis of the above works of art – whether paintings, photographs, statues, murals, or drawings (typically remediated through blogs, Instagram posts, and the like, as "semiotic aggregates"[17]) –, it is worth stressing, once again, that visual media does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it, overcoming cross-cultural barriers by appealing to universal archetypes and values. Through composition, symbolism, and emotional charge, such images offer the illusion of clarity and moral certainty. They give shape to events that are often chaotic, contradictory, and unresolved, and political actors can appropriate these images to sustain ideologies, craft myths of heroism, or rewrite the terms of victimhood and triumph. Ultimately, both Delacroix's *Liberty* and Vucci's photograph function as master narratives in visual form. But just as Delacroix's liberty was never a real woman, Trump's heroic defiance may be a carefully orchestrated performance. The power of such images lies not in their accuracy, but in their ability to persuade, very often at an unconscious (viz. emotional or aesthetic) level, especially in the post-truth

[17] Semiotic aggregates are formed by "the intersections of multiple discourses and the interaction order in particular places […and they are] a result of centripetal forces of aggregation including discourse aggregation" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 167-168). We may consider, for instance, the Statue of Liberty as a semiotic aggregate of political, activist, subversive, intimate/affective discourses, which are recontextualized in such a way as to "transform the original social practices in accordance with the goals and values of the recontextualizing practices of [political] agents and their [voters]" (Baldry and Thibault 2006: 213).

era where, as the above-mentioned Oxford Dictionaries definition of this term has it, "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

The next section will briefly investigate a specific form of belief, i.e. faith in the superempowered presidency of G.W. Bush, used as a propaganda and self-legitimization weapon.

4. Faith and post-truth: self-legitimization and propaganda

Naturally, as Pulitzer Prize winner Ron Suskind wrote in *The New York Times* in 2004 à propos of G.W. Bush's "imperial presidency" (Jeffords 2012: 75) and his framing of the War on Terror as a crusade:

> The faith-based presidency is a with-us-or-against-us model that has been enormously effective at, among other things, keeping the workings and temperament of the Bush White House a kind of state secret. [...] One key feature of the faith-based presidency [is that] open dialogue, based on facts, is not seen as something of inherent value. It may, in fact, create doubt, which undercuts faith. It could result in a loss of confidence in the decision-maker and, just as important, by the decision-maker.

And, a few weeks before Bush's Address at the Cincinnati Museum Center – in which the President described the conflict as a war between "those governed by fear" who "want to destroy our wealth and freedoms", and those on the side of freedom, and which paved the way for the October 2002 Congressional vote authorizing him to wage war on Iraq in 2003 –, while quoting a senior adviser to Bush whom he met in the summer of 2002, Suskind (2004) reports him saying:

> guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do".

This is the perfect definition of "post-truth" as applied to public (viz. foreign) policy "creating [its] own reality" and, more specifically, to a situation where, confronted with the President's evident crisis of legitimacy well before 9/11 (Miller 2002), public opinion had to be reassured and guided in the face of an unprecedented, unmanageable threat, i.e. terrorism[18]. As argued at length elsewhere (Vasta 2016: 204), "banking on the nation's mounting state of fear and uncertainty, which his Administration had greatly

[18] "The crisis of the 9/11 attacks was artfully constructed through news accounts […] that future survival would depend on giving up many basic civil liberties [under the 2001 Patriot Act] – including the denial of habeas corpus [i.e. holding suspects without due process]. These messages were folded into the crime-related discourse of fear which implied that caring and safety are expressed as more control, including surveillance" (Altheide 2007: 288).

favoured, [G.W. Bush] constructs himself as 'the decider' and as the nation's father figure who protects and defends the American people against fear" and consequently frames a polarization between the evil, unpredictable and untrackable Terrorist and the superempowered President leading the Nation, as Commander-in-Chief, to defeat the Terrorist. This is what van Leeuwen[19] would call (self-)legitimization by authorization, which also feeds on mythopoesis.

Indeed, in the context of polarized narratives, self-legitimization cannot stand without "othering/otherization", i.e. the process of "constructing, or imagining a demonized image of 'them', or the Other [lacking the qualities that define 'us', or the Self], and thus supporting an idealized image of 'us', or the Self" (Holliday 2011: 69). This strategy, of paramount importance in mythopoetic narratives which reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions, is particularly evident in G.W. Bush's Announcement of Operation Enduring Freedom, on Oct. 7, 2001 (https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html), when he stated:

> I'm speaking to you today from the Treaty Room of the White House, a place where American Presidents have worked for peace. We're a peaceful nation. Yet, as we have learned, so suddenly and so tragically, there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror. In the face of today's new threat, the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it. We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfil it […]. We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.

Appealing to what Graham *et al.* (2004) identify as: a legitimate power source which is external to the orator (here, the White House); the historical importance and values of the national culture under attack ("American presidents have worked for peace. We're a peaceful nation"); the construction of an antagonistic ("yet") evil Other ("a world of sudden terror", "those who threaten [peace]"); and the need for unification typical of 'call to arms' speeches ("we will fulfil [this mission]"), the President enacts the ITF of war-as-a-logically-necessary-pathway-to-peace ("the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it"), which underpins the ITF of war-as-a-morally-corrective-measure ("we defend [not only] our precious freedoms"), imbued with evident religious overtones ("mission"), which not only legitimizes, but broadens the scope of the action beyond national boundaries ("[but also] the freedom of people everywhere")[20].

Going back to the faith-based presidency of G.W. Bush as "the decider", the same discursive practices as inscribed in the "Bush doctrine" and in the "Securitization model" (Buzan *et al.* 1998) to sanction a pre-emptive military posture (Dunmire 2011; Vasta and Martorana 2018) dominate the justification for Gulf War II: what has become notorious as an evident piece of disinformation, i.e. Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs, was discursively constructed as ideological common ground – particularly in

[19] In van Leeuwen's (2007: 92) definition, authorization is "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom some institutional authority is vested"; moral evaluation is "legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems"; rationalization is "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity"; and mythopoesis is "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions".

[20] For more examples and a thorough analysis of these and other ITFs at work in legitimating war discourse, see Vasta 2016, 2023b. See also Podvornaia 2013.



Figure 7. Screenshot from the televised address by President G.W. Bush aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003

the above-mentioned landmark speech of Oct. 7, 2002 at the Cincinnati Museum Center[21] – and used for propaganda purposes, i.e. to sustain the need for a maximally rapid and effective resolution of the conflict. Among the extremely embarrassing consequences of such propaganda is the one epitomized in Figure 7: "In front of a now-infamous banner on the carrier's bridge reading 'Mission Accomplished,' President Bush declared victory before the United States and Iraq had yet to experience the fullest extent of that war, which began three months earlier in March 2003"[22] and would be the fifth longest in American history.

Despite the fact that the banner allegedly referred to the crew's 10 months' deployment, the longest since the Vietnam War, and that US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld took care to remove any use of the phrase "Mission Accomplished" in the speech itself, when Bush stated that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed", critics of the war accused the photo-op to be propaganda, i.e. a symbol of the Bush administration's unrealistic goals and perceptions of the conflict. The multimodal mismatch between the banner and the core message that the Bush Administration had intended to convey produced the exact opposite narrative and a communicative short circuit which ultimately backfired.

[21] For a detailed linguistic account of how the possession of WMDs was artfully constructed as given, shared information so as to by-pass negotiation on the legitimacy of military intervention in Iraq in 2003, see Vasta 2004: 128-132.

[22] https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/05/04/mission-accomplished-was-a-massive-fail-but-it-was-just-the-beginning/. See also https://millercenter.org/americas-war-in-iraq/mission-accomplished-moment.

5. Conclusion

If the above discussion has achieved its intended purpose, I think I can safely state that developing critical multimodal literacy to contextualize disputable or 'alternative facts' – so as to challenge, fact-check and debunk fake news, prejudice and disinformation – has become a key civic competence. More specifically, a critical understanding of how master narratives and archetypal structures of political storytelling are used to tap into people's emotions, shared values and traditions is essential to gain useful insights into the workings of institutional and social media discourse, hopefully with a view to harnessing potentially manipulative practices.

Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis benefits from the study of master narrative as a central pivot connecting, over different time spans, different theoretical perspectives, different text genres and their multimodal orchestration, while incorporating the key notion of intertextuality. In every political act, narrative and storytelling are of paramount significance and so the notions of master- and counternarrative are key to reconstructing the hero's and heroine's mythological journey, which is hidden but always present: CDA and all the more so, in the digital age, CMDA allows what is hidden to become visible and open to public debate.

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