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 As the gatekeepers of information – journalists, editors, publishers – have been replaced by algorithms and unfiltered virality, we are also witnessing the darker side of this communication age, characterized as it is by increasing disintermediation: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.

Acknowledgements

The contributions collected in this volume have been inspired by the Seminar on *Social Media, Disinformation and Open Debate* which was held in Gorizia on April 10, 2025. Together with the authors, we, as editors of this Special Issue, wish to thank DILL, the Department of *Lingue e Letterature, Comunicazione, Formazione e Società* of the University of Udine, as well as the *Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Gorizia* and the *Consorzio per lo Sviluppo del Polo Universitario di Gorizia*, for the financial support to the Seminar's organization and dissemination of its results, within the activities of DILL's *Laboratorio di ricerca sulla Comunicazione Strategica e i Nuovi Media* (CSNM) coordinated by Nicoletta Vasta.

References

Bailly A., X. Haranger, A.M. Selman, S.A. Milner, I. Chaudonneret Oudelette 2026. The risks of hallucinations and misuse of generative artificial intelligence before French courts. At https://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2026/03/the-risks-of-hallucinations-and-misuse-of-generative-artificial-intelligence-before-french-courts?p=1 (March 18, 2026).

Bolter J.D. and R. Grusin 1999. *(Re)mediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Bruns A. 2008. Life beyond the public sphere: towards a networked model for political deliberation. *Information Polity* 13/1-2: 71-85.

Demata M. 2025. Fighting (for) truth? Alex Jones, the WHO and the legitimization of conspiracy discourse. In M.M. Roslyng, A.M. Jönsson and A. Rantasila (eds), *Communicating Science, Climate Change and the Environment in Hybrid Media: Constructed Facts, Contested Truths*. London and New York: Routledge: 89-111.

Demata M., V. Zorzi and A. Zottola (eds) 2022. *Conspiracy Theory Discourses*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Jarrett K. 2009. Private talk in the public sphere. *Communication, Politics & Culture* 42/2: 116-135.

Jones R. (ed.) 2021. *Viral Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ku K.Y., J. Li, V. Lun, Y.K. Tsang, M. Lui, Q. Kong and Y. Song 2026. Empowering critical thinking in combating social media misinformation. *Computers in Human Behavior* 175: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108829.

Galindo-Domínguez H., M.J. Bezanilla and L. Campo 2025. Relationship between social media use and critical thinking in university students. *Education and Information Technologies* 30: 6641-6665.

Hague B.N. and B.D. Loader (eds) [1999]2005. *Digital Democracy. Discourse and Decision-making in the Digital Age*. London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Lemke J.L. 1988. Discourses in conflict. In J.D. Benson and W.S. Greaves (eds), *Systemic Functional Approaches to Discourse*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex: 29-50.

Maci S., M. Demata, M. McGlashan and P. Seargeant (eds) 2024. *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation*. London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Moore R.K. [1999]2005. Democracy and cyberspace. In B.N. Hague and B.D. Loader (eds), *Digital Democracy. Discourse and Decision-making in the Digital Age*. London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis: 39-59.

Naim M. 2023. *The Revenge of Power. How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century*. New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group.

Orhan A. 2023. Fake news detection on social media: the predictive role of university students' critical thinking dispositions and new media literacy. *Smart Learning Environments* 10/29.

Papacharissi Z. 2002. The virtual sphere. *New Media & Society* 4/1: 9-27.

Seargeant P. 2022. *The Art of Political Storytelling. Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Shane P.M. (ed.) 2004. *Democracy Online*. London and New York: Routledge.

Surjatmodjo D., A.A. Unde, H. Cangara and A.F. Sonni 2024. Information pandemic: a critical review of disinformation spread on social media and its implications for state resilience. *Social Sciences* 13/418: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13080418.

van Leeuwen T. 2007. Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication* 1/1: 91-112.

Vasta N. 2023. *Storytelling and Identity Construction in US Political Discourse*. Udine: Forum.