

IDENTIFYING AND COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

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For some decades, we have been impacted daily by digital technologies, social networks and more recently, artificial intelligence. While these new tools have considerably changed our lives and improved our means of communicating, they are also the source of fake news, false information that pollutes the public space. For example, Anna Beitane, head of e-learning and continuing education projects at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu, pointed out a webpage cloned from that of the Belgian newspaper, *Le Soir*, with the headline 'Macron, Saudi Arabia's preferred candidate for the presidential election' in 2017. The site, which, aesthetically, has all the hallmarks of a credible site, was shared on social networks by Marion Maréchal Lepen, a politician who at the time was a member of the Rassemblement National.

This fake news 'impacts the way we interact between human beings,' explained Cécile Dolbeau-Bandin, Lecturer-researcher at the IUT Grand Ouest Normandie and researcher at CERREV (Risks & Vulnerabilities Research Centre) at the University of Caen. We are victims of infobesity, an information overload that makes it difficult to sort through it all.' Dolbeau-Bandin distinguished between two types of fake news, namely misinformation or false information without

MODERATION

Anna Beitane, Project Manager for e-learning and continuing education at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

SPEAKERS

Virginie Bagneux, Lecturer-researcher in Social Psychology at the University of Caen in social psychology at the University of Caen-Normandie

Stefano Braghiroli, Professor of European Studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

Cécile Dolbeau-Bandin, Lecturer-researcher at IUT Grand Ouest Normandie and researcher at CERREV (Risks & Vulnerabilities Research Centre) at the University of Caen

Maili Vilson, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu

the intention of causing harm, and disinformation, or misleading or truncated information with the aim of manipulating others. 'The main goal is to divide democratic societies during high-stakes moments like the war in Ukraine or the election of Donald Trump in the United States.' Added to this is the development of artificial intelligence in recent years, which has increased tenfold the realism with which certain images can deceive us, particularly deepfakes, the faked videos and photos that circulate on social networks. The photo of Pope Francis in a white rapper-style parka, which went viral in early 2023, is the perfect exam-



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Virginie Bagneux

ple. 'Although they can sometimes make people laugh, we mustn't overlook the democratic issue that arises from them. This requires training, very early, to develop critical thinking, and to know what a source and verified information are.'

Virginia Bagneux, Lecturer-researcher in Social Psychology at the University of Caen-Normandy, discussed zetetics as a tool for distinguishing true information from false information. This approach was defined in the 1980s by Henri Broch, who championed it in his book, *The Art of Doubt*. 'The goal of critical thinking, as he sees it, is to determine whether I can

trust a piece of information or not, bearing in mind that there is room for doubt in between.' Two sceptical tools were then presented: one was a likelihood slider for specific information, which went from 'absolutely probable' to 'not at all probable'. It is up



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to the 'informed' to adjust this slider after reflection and research. 'There is this sentence from Carl Sagan, an American scientist, which is very interesting: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence".' The other tool presented was a level of evidence scale, which classifies by degree of certainty whether information can be considered reliable or not. 'Testimony is not proof. It's not necessarily wrong, but to be on the safe side, it's not enough', she explained.

Stefano Braghioli, Professor of European studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu, pointed out that, far from being a new phenomenon, disinformation is as old as our civilisations. He cited the example of an Egyptian hieroglyph that recounts the warlike exploits of the pharaoh, Ramses, 3,000 years ago, the battle of Qadesh. 'We know he narrowly escaped death. But when he returned home, he had this magnificent engraving made which gives a completely different version of the story.' The minimum goal of disinformation is to create doubt, so that the public is no longer able to distinguish truth from falsehood. Its danger lies in the fact that it can circulate freely in a democratic environment. Maili Vilson, Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu, noted that foreign minorities are even more vulnerable. Language barriers, distrust of mainstream media, community-centered social networks, lack of fact-checking initiatives, lack of awareness of the country's media... All this causes political marginalisation.

A recent photo of singer Taylor Swift holding an ice cream and smiling next to a starving African child illustrates this problem well. This montage, despite its poor quality of execution, aims to increase the distrust of these populations towards society. 'We can clearly see what information this is trying to convey,' concluded Maili Vilson.