

Beyond Verification: Misinformation, Disinformation, and the Artifices of Authenticity

Introduction

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In this Special Section, we foreground authenticity as a determining factor in the diffusion of misinformation and disinformation and as a critical site of intervention for strategies to curb its spread. We argue for the necessity of moving past the binary of verification—true

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versus false, real versus fake—to understand how authenticity is fabricated, staged, experienced, and mobilized to spread misinformation and disinformation. In other words, we examine the artifices of authentication and their central role in the diffusion of misleading and polarizing content. The works collected in this Special Section offer valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to help us navigate the complexities of misinformation and disinformation. Through its multidisciplinary scope, this Special Section not only enhances our theoretical understanding but also guides practical efforts in media literacy, content moderation, digital policy, and public engagement.

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From climate denialism to health conspiracies, social media platforms are riddled with stories that look real but often rely on decontextualized or distorted evidence. While much scholarly work has diagnosed the spread of misinformation and disinformation as a symptom of the post-truth era—attributed variously to a failure of media literacy (Lewandowsky, 2019), the insularity of echo chambers, and the resulting collapse of institutional trust—these perspectives often overlook the affective engine driving the circulation of misleading and polarizing content online. Previous scholarship has mapped how digital platforms exploit affective economies to drive engagement (e.g., Rathje et al., 2021; Törnberg et al., 2021). However, the question of how affect produces the sensation of truth itself, and its implications for the diffusion of misinformation and disinformation, remains largely unexplored. This Special Section foregrounds the role of authenticity, demonstrating that misinformation and disinformation do not proliferate merely because of the absence of literacy, trust, or discussions needed to discern facts from fiction. They succeed because a complex composition of actors ranging from social media platforms to armies of propaganda bots has economized and politicized the affective texture of authenticity, hijacking the feeling of “real.”

With technical fixes and fact-checking initiatives proving necessary but insufficient to contain the rise of misleading and polarizing information (Vinhas & Bastos, 2022), we center authenticity as the flywheel of the misinformation and disinformation industry and a critical site of intervention for strategies to curb the diffusion of this content. Such an approach requires moving beyond asking whether information is factual or not to examining how it is constructed to appear and feel authentic. The contributions in this Special Section demonstrate the urgency of moving past the binary of verification—true versus false, real versus fake—to understand how authenticity is fabricated, staged, experienced, and mobilized within the misinformation and disinformation complex. In other words, we examine the artifices of authentication and their central role in the spread of misleading and polarizing information.

This requires de-essentializing authenticity, pushing us to conceive of it not as an intrinsic quality of a person or a fact but rather as a performance enacted through social networks that condition the rituals, speeds, and aesthetics required for a piece of information to be authenticated by a community (Burton & Chun, 2023; Chun, 2021). Essential protagonists in this drama are algorithms, such as recommendation engines, collaborative filtering, and curation algorithms (DiResta, 2024), that do not merely sort content and match profiles but actively curate affective resonance. By constructing temporalities, modulating affective responses, and attuning user habits to platform affordances, social media shape the spaces users

are exposed to, algorithmically forging homophilic clusters in which trust is formed (Chun, 2021). Simultaneously, this shaping frames the other not merely as factually incorrect but as viscerally inauthentic, or simply fake. Such rifts foreclose the space for agonistic encounters—that is, difficult discussions necessary for democracy to thrive—across lines of social difference, entrenching forms of identification based on non-negotiable values (Mouffe, 2013).

Within these fractures, the misinformation and disinformation complex thrives. It fills the interstitial spaces between the inside and the outside, bridging the gap left by the disappearance of contested facts with *felt truths*. As the contributions in this Special Section demonstrate, it does so by manufacturing affectively charged information that mobilizes existential fear. Ranging from the dissolution of binary gender to the erasure of the nation and the corruption of the body, these mobilizations substitute for the stability of a contested, yet shared, reality. In this context, the rejection of mainstream science or democratic institutions is not merely an obscurantist repudiation of knowledge but also a defense of a specific, curated authenticity against a seemingly artificial, inauthentic, and therefore antagonistic outside. The deepening of the fractures dividing the social body into homophilic islands is perpetrated by an industry that monetizes the rancor seething within the cracks through the quantification of affective states and the extraction of advertising revenue.

The authors gathered in this Special Section move beyond the limitations of technical solutionism to investigate the affective, temporal, structural, and narrative dimensions of authenticity and their role in the diffusion of misinformation and disinformation. Their research shows how authenticity emerges through shared affective experiences, which result from complex processes involving technical infrastructures, intensities of engagement, user experiences, and cultural practices. They address the orchestration of misinformation and disinformation through techno-cultural and techno-affective flows that combine network trackers with emotional bursts, algorithmic recommendations with national myths, and collective wounds with conspiratorial fantasies. By separating veracity from the polysemous perception of authenticity, these contributions clarify where fact-checking falls short and how misinformation and disinformation spread through data and its networked infrastructures. We see this through a variety of approaches ranging from digital methods to media theory, from large-scale content analysis to speculative adversarial methods.

The articles in this Special Section originate from a pre-conference organized by the Digital Democracies Institute (Simon Fraser University) in conjunction with the 2023 International Communication Association conference in Toronto. The pre-conference was convened as part of the *Beyond Verification* project, a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-sponsored research initiative. This project investigates why, how, and under what circumstances (social, cultural, technical, and political) people find information to be true or authentic, regardless of its facticity, and it develops new strategies to limit the diffusion of misinformation and disinformation online. Emerging from this diverse collection of scholarship, three key themes offer a new framework for understanding how authenticity is staged, felt, exploited, and weaponized in the digital age.

Theme 1: Propaganda and Network Publics

Contributions within this theme address the shortcomings of mid-20th-century propaganda models for understanding how misinformation and disinformation circulate within networked publics. Collectively, authors within this theme detach the term propaganda from its mass-media legacy, which described it as a top-down, strictly intentional, and inherently deceptive practice. Building on a growing body of literature on networked influence campaigns (e.g., Bounegru et al., 2018; Giglietto et al., 2020; Soriano & Gaw, 2022), these contributions reveal how propaganda now functions through organic, distributed dynamics. Hence, they suggest recalibrating the concept for a period of imitative social media, highlighting the role of authenticity in fostering the circulation of problematic and polarizing information.

Richard Rogers and Kamila Koronska introduce the concept of post-truth space, which they define as clusters of interlinked actors (web pages, social media groups, online influencers) working in coordination to express political influence through the circulation of alternative facts or problematic information. Conceptually, the authors use post-truth spaces to describe orchestrated propaganda efforts, such as alternative influence networks (Lewis, 2020), fake news engagement space (Bounegru et al., 2018), coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns (Giglietto et al., 2020), and participatory propaganda (Tuters & Noordenbos, 2024). Unique to post-truth spaces is their focus on manufacturing and propagating alternative facts to displace mainstream narratives and establish antagonistic political programs. Rogers and Koronska's contribution is also methodological. They employ social network analysis to develop two complementary tools: the Post-Truth Space Mapping technique, which delineates these spaces and identifies their central actors, and Cluster Influence Measures, which quantify the influence one cluster holds over others.

Moving from structure to resonance, Boris Noordenbos and Marc Tuters advance a multidirectional conception of "ambient propaganda." Building on Tony Schwartz's (1973) resonant theory of communication, the authors advance a conception of propaganda not as unidirectional and intentional but rather as driven by intricate processes of attunement and synchronization between social media users and platforms' technological affordances. These interactions produce shared constructions of authenticity and subjectification in the service of propaganda, emerging through a rhythmic dance between the medium, its ambiances, and its users.

Finally, Camille Alloing, Vincent Fournier, Valérie Reid, Sara Germain, Olivier Turbide, and Stéphanie Yates engage critically with astroturfing, the communicative process of simulating the authenticity of organic citizen groups to manufacture consensus around covert interests. They situate this phenomenon within the digital affective capitalism that underpins social media platforms' business models, therefore highlighting how the instrumentalization of affect through social media platforms produces artificial authenticity. Astroturfing strategies subsume and feed off users' affective labor—expressed materially through clicks, interactions, and engagement—to simulate authenticity and foster a sense of collectivity. Their contribution is formalized in a matrix model discerning distinct typologies of astroturfing, demonstrating how specific configurations of affective labor lead to different strategic forms of authentic and inauthentic, sincere and insincere, mobilization.

Theme 2: The Temporalities of Authenticity

Authenticity is not just a networked phenomenon. As our second theme discusses, it is also deeply temporal. Authors within this theme investigate how speed, delay, repetition, and the machinic rhythms of digital media help stage the experience of truth. The critical thread bridging the first two themes is affect, employed here to expose the temporal rhythms of authenticity, a quality constantly made and remade in response to infrastructural ebbs and flows.

In "App Time: The Dual-Layered Logic of Appification," Anthony Burton and Esther Weltevrede extend Philip Agre's (1994) conception of grammars of action by attending to the tactile engagements of modern dating apps, examining them as a grammar with its own temporality that contrasts with the network time of application backends. They formalize the discrepancy between the user's felt experience and the app's computational logic through the concept of "app time." Through a networked walkthrough, a method combining user enactment with network traffic analysis, Burton and Weltevrede challenge common conceptions of timing in app interactions. Rather than the backend merely responding to user input, they demonstrate how backend operations preempt user experiences by continuously feeding data forward to produce algorithmically conditioned and affectively loaded moments capable of evoking a sense of seamless authenticity.

While Burton and Weltevrede examine the manufactured and preemptive immediacy of app interfaces, Sara Bimo shifts the lens to the slow accumulation of conspiratorial meaning. In "Repetition, Rumination, and Determinism: Exploring the Temporal Logic of QAnon," Bimo complicates the prevailing assumption that digital misinformation is defined solely by viral speed. Instead, through a qualitative analysis of 4,996 Q-drops (the cryptic messages posted by the anonymous figure Q that form the QAnon canon), Bimo maps a conspiratorial timescape characterized by cyclicity, archival hermeneutics, and determinism. Bimo argues that these messages foster a sense of slowness, in which QAnon followers continuously reinterpret old texts to identify deterministic patterns in history. This specific temporality, starkly different from the rhythms of everyday life, creates strong affective bonds that bind disparate users into a committed conspiratorial community.

Time and affect are also central to Shahpour Akhavi and Rory Sharp's work on climate change anxiety. Adopting the research persona method (Bounegru et al., 2022), the authors embodied two fictional profiles whose interests intersect with climate anxiety through different vectors. By performing these personae, the authors trace how algorithms stage affective patterns for users through slow, repetitive, and habitual consumption of content. Their analysis reveals how affective reactions accrue over time into cohesive responses to the climate crisis, exposing the subtle, micro-political, and temporal dynamics inherent to curated online environments. Documenting a three-month journey during which they were exposed to content ranging from aviation and UFO sightings to tradwife stories, the authors argue that misinformation and disinformation are not the direct output of specific actors, be they creators, users, or algorithms, but rather emerge in ways that exceed their technical or social foundations.

Theme 3: Performing Authenticity

The final theme shifts focus to the narrative constructions and performative acts required to construct and sustain authenticity. Whether analyzing the scripting of news stories, the use of veridiction in propaganda, or the role of intermediaries and influencers in shaping cultural identities, these articles reveal how the efficacy of a truth claim often depends less on its facticity than on its narrative and performative delivery. Together, these works demonstrate how authenticity is not merely an inherent quality of a piece of information but also a labor-intensive performance, capable of both anchoring democratic trust and accelerating the spread of disinformation.

Sarah Nguyễn, Celestine Le, and Rachel E. Moran investigate the construction of authenticity within the Vietnamese diasporic community. Through an ethnographic and content analysis of popular Vietnamese and diasporic news channels, they reveal how practices of information authentication are intertwined with the very bonds of community membership. They argue that credibility is not derived from facticity but from the interplay of personal authenticity and the performance of shared cultural values. By prioritizing these resonant behaviors over accuracy, online trusted intermediaries such as social media influencers create a dynamic in which the strengthening of collective identity becomes the primary vehicle for verifying, legitimizing, and circulating harmful, non-factual narratives.

Continuing the examination of trusted intermediaries, Victoria O'Meara, Esteban Morales, and Jaigris Hodson look at the interplay between influencer discourses of authenticity and the spread of misinformation through the lens of self-performance. Through interviews with cancer community influencers, the study investigates how these actors balance the desire to share sincerely held beliefs with the perceived risk of spreading health misinformation. To navigate this tension, influencers perform what the authors call "authentic expertise," a highly individualized form of authority, cultivated and performed through the sharing of personal truths and imperfections. Because of its reliance on personal experience, authentic expertise acts not only as a mode of self-representation essential for recognition in digital spaces but also as an important site of retreat from the potential of harming others online. At the same time, because of the trust that this form of performative authenticity creates, it can become a vehicle for misinformation, potentially steering audiences away from established medical knowledge.

Concluding this theme, Prem Sylvester, Sage Hughes, Javier Ruiz Soler, Matt Canute, and Wendy Chun examine the performative logics of news authentication. They argue that authenticity is not an inherent quality of a news article but rather a performative effect rendered by the inclusion of recognized cultural and social tropes, from expert quotes to specific political discourses. Avoiding reducing authenticity to a simple script, the authors emphasize that the recognition of authenticity is not determined univocally by a story's elements. On the contrary, the same story can appear trustworthy to diverse readers because it offers multiple authenticity signals. Through a mixed-methods analysis of anti-Asian hate news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors find that the authentication of news articles often hinges on rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion. Stories feel authentic to audiences when they draw sharp boundaries around who belongs within a community and who does not. Their finding addresses the need to move past binary understandings of verification mentioned in the introduction. As their work illustrates, there is no

simple split between authentic and inauthentic news, but rather a spectrum of modes of verification that audiences use to evaluate whether a story accurately indexes reality.

Conclusions

This Special Section presents a multifaceted exploration of the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation. The articles emphasize the central role of affect in arriving at nuanced understandings of how digital platforms, performativity, cultural contexts, and temporal dynamics shape the landscape of information authenticity. As Ganaele Langlois and Rory Sharp argue in the afterword, misinformation and disinformation succeed not only by planting false beliefs but also by exploiting audiences' affective responses to information. Therefore, curbing its diffusion requires moving past technical solutions or verification methods that focus solely on facticity. As they suggest, a research agenda on misinformation and disinformation must dissect the mechanisms by which affective responses to information are transformed into durable truths.

The works collected in this Special Section contribute to this agenda by offering valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to help us navigate the complexities of misinformation and disinformation. As we continue to grapple with the implications of misinformation and disinformation, the contributions in this Special Section not only enhance our theoretical understanding but also guide practical efforts in media literacy, content moderation, digital policy, and public engagement.

We see future work in extending these approaches to synthetic media and AI-generated content, where the artifices of authentication are increasingly automated. Generative AI complicates frameworks developed in this Special Section by producing content that is neither true nor false in any straightforward sense but rather probabilistically plausible—optimized for the appearance of authenticity without direct, significant reference to an underlying reality. This raises the stakes of our core argument: if authenticity was already a performance, AI makes that performance cheaper, more scalable, and, most importantly, more self-contradictory.

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