THE END OF REALITY AS WE KNEW IT

Disinformation, Artificial Intelligence and the new era of fact-checking

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Daniel Catalan-Matamoros
&
Carlos Elías

Dykinson, S.L.

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PREFACE

SEARCHING FOR REALITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CURRENT DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

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1. INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The search for reality in the 21st century has become a task of unprecedented complexity. We find ourselves in what scholars describe as the "Information Disorder" era, a period characterized by the deliberate erosion of trust in global information ecosystems (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Kavtaradze, 2025). This phenomenon is not merely a proliferation of "fake news" but a systemic crisis affecting social cohesion and democratic stability (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). By 2025, estimates suggest that up to 62% of online content may be false or artificially generated, exposing 86% of the global population to deceptive narratives and costing approximately $78 billion annually in economic damage, according to the Disinformation & Information Security Alliance (2025) and the Disinformation Commission (2025).

To navigate this landscape, it is fundamental to distinguish between three core concepts: misinformation (false information shared without the intent to cause harm, often by mistake), disinformation (content created and disseminated deliberately to deceive and maximize political or economic harm), and malinformation (genuine information used with malicious intent, such as the strategic leak of private data) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Hameleers, 2023; Cazzamatta & Sarısakaloğlu, 2025). While historical precedents like the 1493 Gutenberg press allowed for the early propagation of mass hoaxes, the digital era has amplified these tactics through algorithms and viral reach, turning disinformation into a weapon of hybrid warfare (Kollár, 2025).

2. TECHNOLOGICAL CATALYSTS: GENERATIVE AI AND THE DEEPFAKE THREAT

The current disinformation landscape is dominated by Artificial Intelligence (AI), which acts as a "double-edged sword" (Gutiérrez-Caneda & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). On one hand, generative AI has democratized the creation of high-quality false content.

Advanced tools allow for the production of deepfakes: hyper-realistic video, audio, and images that blur the line between fact and fabrication (Pazderska, 2025; Maia et al., 2025). These fabrications are particularly dangerous because of the "liar's dividend", a phenomenon where public figures can dismiss uncomfortable truths as mere AI manipulations (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

The proliferation of Large Language Models (LLMs) has facilitated the automated creation of disinformation narratives that mimic professional journalistic styles, significantly increasing the workload for human fact-checkers (Cazzamatta & Sarısakaloğlu, 2025). Furthermore, AI is prone to "hallucinations", where systems generate false facts with absolute conviction, contributing unintentionally to the pollution of the information environment (Pazderska, 2025; Rustanta & Sari, 2025). This "industrialization of falsehoods" creates an environment where truth becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from synthetic representations (Maia et al., 2025).

3. PROPAGATION MECHANISMS: FILTER BUBBLES AND THE SHIFT IN AUTHORITY

Disinformation does not spread in a vacuum, it relies on the technical architecture of digital platforms. Recommendation algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritize sensationalist and emotionally charged content (Pazderska, 2025). This creates filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users are exposed only to information that confirms their existing biases while ignoring or discrediting divergent viewpoints (Pazderska, 2025; Rustanta & Sari, 2025).

This cognitive isolation fosters social polarization and undermines the possibility of a shared reality in the public sphere. In social media environments, the validity of information is frequently associated with popularity (likes and shares) rather than factual accuracy (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). This "grassroots epistemology" allows malicious actors, such as troll farms and bots, to manipulate the perception of consensus on critical issues, from electoral processes to public health (Pazderska, 2025; Rustanta & Sari, 2025). The transition from traditional mainstream media "gatekeeping" to decentralized, algorithm-driven flows has dismantled established structures of information authority (Rustanta & Sari, 2025; Shin et al., 2025).

4. THE RISE OF AUTOMATED FACT-CHECKING

In response to the speed and volume of disinformation, fact-checking has evolved from a manual journalistic practice into a discipline integrating advanced technological solutions (Kavtaradze, 2025). Traditional fact-checking, while rigorous, cannot keep pace with viral propagation (Chae & Tewksbury, 2024; Agunlejika, 2025). Consequently, efforts to automate various stages of the verification process have emerged:

- Claim detection: Identifying claims that are "check-worthy" or "checkable" within a corpus of text (Chae & Tewksbury, 2024; Agunlejika, 2025).
- Evidence retrieval: Gathering relevant data from authoritative databases, historical fact-check archives, or search engine results (Chae & Tewksbury, 2024).
- Verification and verdict: Using mathematical models to determine the veracity of a claim by comparing it to retrieved evidence (Školkay & Filin, 2019).
- Explanation generation: Creating justifications for a verdict that are understandable to the public (Školkay & Filin, 2019; Kavtaradze, 2025).

Projects like ClaimBuster, Full Fact AI, and tools developed by organizations such as Snopes (e.g., FactBot) demonstrate the potential of AI to assist fact-checkers (Školkay & Filin, 2019; Chae & Tewksbury, 2024). However, current studies suggest that fully automated solutions that do not require human supervision remain limited in their effectiveness (Školkay & Filin, 2019).

5. EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND THE HUMAN-IN-THE-LOOP PARADIGM

Disinformation has caused a collapse in the social infrastructure of truth. Trust in news media has fallen drastically in many countries, as low as 32% in the United States, driven by perceptions of bias and political agendas, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2025). Institutional authority is increasingly replaced by individual influencers and communities based on emotional affinity (Rustanta & Sari, 2025).

Paradoxically, the use of AI to combat disinformation can also generate skepticism. There is a risk that contradicting AI systems could lead to "epistemic relativism", where the public loses faith in any form of fact-based discourse (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). Therefore, transparency in how these tools are used is fundamental to rebuilding journalistic credibility (Cuartielles et al., 2024). The prevailing consensus in both computer science and journalism research emphasizes a "Human-in-the-loop" approach (Kavtaradze, 2025; Gutiérrez-Caneda & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024). This paradigm ensures that while AI handles large-scale data processing and claim-evidence matching, the final decision regarding veracity remains under human judgment, preserving the epistemic authority of journalists (Kavtaradze, 2025; Agunlejika, 2025).

6. STRATEGIES FOR RESILIENCE: EDUCATION, REGULATION, AND TECHNOLOGY

Combating the disinformation landscape requires a multifaceted approach involving governments, platforms, educators, and citizens (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). Key strategies include:

- **Media and information literacy (MIL):** This remains the most robust long-term defense. Implementing MIL in school curricula from an early age is essential for developing critical thinking and the ability to discern reliable sources (Rustanta & Sari, 2025).
- **Platform accountability:** Tech companies must be more transparent about their algorithms and deploy effective systems to detect bots and deepfakes (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). Regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the EU AI Act establish frameworks for ethical content moderation and systemic failure liability (Cazzamatta & Sarısakaloğlu, 2025).
- **Multisectoral collaboration:** Global networks like the *International Fact-Checking Network* (IFCN) and European initiatives like the *Democracy Action Plan* allow for shared resources and coordinated responses to foreign interference (García-Gordillo et al., 2025).
- **Veracity technologies:** Innovations such as blockchain for tracking information provenance and digital watermarking for AI-generated content help restore the integrity of the digital ecosystem (Rustanta & Sari, 2025; Maia et al., 2025).

7. TOWARDS A HEALTHY INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

The struggle for reality is not just a technical battle but a profound communicative and ethical challenge (Rustanta & Sari, 2025). In a world where disinformation is weaponized in cyber wars and political disputes, society must reaffirm its commitment to factual truth as the foundation for democratic dialogue (Kollár, 2025). The integration of AI into journalism offers opportunities to scale verification, but its success depends on maintaining human values of responsibility and justice (Kavtaradze, 2025; Maia et al., 2025). Ultimately, searching for reality in this complex landscape requires a collective effort to reconstruct an information environment where truth, rather than deception, is the primary value.

8. THE EUROPEAN DISINFORMATION CONGRESS

This book features selected content from the 2nd European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, organized by MediaLab at Madrid University Carlos III, Spain. Held on October 29–30, 2025, the event far exceeded expectations and established itself as a leading global forum on the information ecosystem. The study of disinformation and media literacy addresses issues of such societal relevance that they cannot remain confined to the academic ivory tower. As journalists, engineers, practitioners and social scientists, we are guided by the shared mission that unites science and journalism: the pursuit of truth and its communication to the public.

The organization of this second congress was far from an isolated event. The UC3M MediaLab at Madrid University Carlos III has established itself as a global leader in the scholarly study of disinformation and fact-checking. A recognized benchmark across

Spain, Europe, and beyond, the Lab manages a high-impact research portfolio funded by the European Commission, including two prestigious Jean Monnet Chairs, the United Nations, and the Government of Spain, alongside regional and international schemes. As the definitive national reference in the field, the UC3M MediaLab is responsible for the strategic domain www.disinformation.es, a portal that bridges the gap between cutting-edge scientific output and strategic public outreach activities.

The following key metrics highlight the event's success:

- High participation: The congress saw a nearly 70% increase in attendance compared to its first edition, growing from 251 to 428 participants.
- Global reach: The event achieved exceptional geographic diversity, with attendees representing 58 countries from across the world. While there was a strong presence from Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the United States, the scale of internationalization transformed the congress into a truly global platform.
- Scientific excellence: The quality of the program was ensured by a rigorous peer-review process. Out of 127 abstracts submitted, 86 (67%) were approved for presentation. These contributions addressed critical cross-cutting topics, including artificial intelligence, algorithmic accountability, journalism ethics, and disinformation in the context of elections and war.
- Digital and open science impact: The congress strategy ensured high visibility through the #EUDisinfo_Congress hashtag on social media. Furthermore, in a commitment to open science, recorded sessions have been made available to the wider research community via the official congress website, and the University video repository which is available in all standard search engines.

In summary, by executing its program with 100% compliance and fostering high-level academic and professional dialogue, the congress has positioned UC3M MediaLab as a global reference in disinformation research. The Organizing and Scientific Committees extends its gratitude to all participants and contributors who made this milestone possible.

9. INTRODUCING THE BOOK

9.1. The end of reality as we knew it: Disinformation, Artificial Intelligence and the new era of fact-checking

The mid-2020s have led to a pivotal era where the traditional boundaries of truth are being systematically redrawn by the convergence of artificial intelligence, algorithmic personalization, and the industrial-scale spread of falsehoods. As we navigate this "Disinformation Age", the fundamental question of "what is reality?" has moved from philosophical inquiry to a front-line concern for national security, public health, and democratic stability. This book, "The end of reality as we knew it: Disinformation, Artificial Intelligence and the new era of fact-checking", serves as a comprehensive cartography of this

landscape, offering a multidisciplinary exploration of how truth is contested, how synthetic illusions are manufactured, and how the future of verification must adapt to survive.

Through **43 chapters written by 75 internationally renowned scholars**, scientists and practitioners in the field, this volume tries to unmask the structural and cognitive mechanisms of information disorder while proposing a new collaborative and technological framework for verification. The primary aim of this work is to delineate the multidisciplinary strategies necessary to combat the industrialization of falsehood and rebuild epistemic trust in our institutions, moving beyond simple debunking to address the deeply held values and identities that fuel post-truth narratives.

This global effort integrates perspectives from **19 countries**, including Spain, Portugal, France, Brazil, the United States, Slovakia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Croatia, Poland, Cyprus, Russia, Australia, Iran, Lithuania, and the Philippines. This global reach ensures that the defense of reality remains as diverse and resilient as the threats it faces. By bridging the gap between social sciences, artificial intelligence, and professional practice, the authors provide a critical roadmap for navigating an information ecosystem where the distinction between truth and synthetic illusion has become a defining battlefield of our time.

This book is composed of the following six sections:

9.2. Section I: Living in the fog: Philosophical and rhetorical foundations of reality

The chapters explore the structural and conceptual shifts that have weakened our shared factual consciousness. In this section, we examine how the "post-truth" condition is not merely about lies, but about a "speculative attitude" where individuals construct subjective versions of truth to serve utilitarian interests, often treating truth as a form of personal "profit". The chapters here introduce "I-pistemology", a mode where evidence is gathered through scattered personal experiences rather than institutional expertise, leading to a fragmentation of reality into divergent worldviews. This section also proposes a "contestivist" approach, arguing that disinformation persists because it fulfills a fundamental human drive to project meaning and identity in a power-mediated economy. Furthermore, we look at the role of rhetoric and news literacy in online debates, the necessity of rebuilding "epistemic trust" in scientific communication, particularly regarding climate change, and the phenomenon of "ambient disinformation", where the material properties of sound on platforms like TikTok create affective political atmospheres before content is even interpreted.

9.3. Section II: Synthetic illusions: The algorithmic mechanics of truth distortion

This section jumps into the technical engines that drive our current state of disorientation. We begin by unpacking the architecture of Large Language Models

(LLMs), revealing how they function as advanced games of "autocomplete" that can be manipulated through "LLM grooming" to seed propaganda into AI training pipelines. This section investigates the societal risks posed by the deregulation of content moderation on major platforms, which has increased the visibility of coordinated disinformation networks. We explore the "communication reflexivity" of users as they learn to detect signs of artificiality in automated accounts and the "anchoring effects" observed in multi-agent LLM debates when models are exposed to persuasive but inaccurate data. A critical warning is issued regarding "synthetic friends" or AI companions, which can create "epistemic cocoons" where trust migrates to synthetic partners, making traditional factual corrections nearly impossible due to affective loyalty. Finally, we critique the architecture of "crowdsourced truth", such as Community Notes, arguing that its "bridging algorithm" risks turning factual accuracy into a byproduct of statistical equilibrium between digital elites.

9.4. Section III: The fabric of realities: Identity, geopolitics, and narratives

These chapters provide empirical evidence of how disinformation is weaponized in high-stakes social and military conflicts. This section analyzes the paradigm shift in national security toward information warfare, which now targets public perception as a primary digital battleground. Case studies document the "parallel battlefield" of the 12-day Israel-Iran war, showing how bot networks and AI operations shaped wartime discourse, and how war reporters must now adopt new skills like OSINT to navigate "hybrid wars". We examine how unverified accounts in Chile amplify migrant-related stigma and the "fact-checking nightmare" during Kenya's 2022 elections, where official sources often share only "partial truths" to create chaos. The section further explores "information laundering" in the German judicial system, the ecosystems of climate disinformation sustained by micro-influencers, and the communication machines of the far-right in Brazil that exploit religious moral panic. The section concludes by comparing professional photojournalism with visual disinformation during the 2024 DANA floods in Spain, identifying how decontextualized images are used to mobilize fear.

9.5. Section IV: The fragile perception: Cognitive vulnerability and public opinion

This section shifts the focus to the "human factor", examining the cognitive and social psychological mechanisms that make us susceptible to manipulation. We introduce the "Wave and Wall" model for building cognitive resilience against three levels of load: informational (volume), epistemic (complexity), and identity (emotional involvement). This section proposes a "technocognition" framework, arguing that misinformation is co-produced by human cognitive biases and algorithmic inference. We assess public perceptions in Cyprus, where many users rely solely on their own judgment to verify news, and we examine the emotional bond between disinformation outlets like RT France and their

marginalized audiences. The literature review on public trust in fact-checking reveals that credibility must be continually earned through transparency. This section also investigates the impact of "negativism" and sensationalism in TV news on audiences' mental models, the role of TikTok fandoms as "gatekeepers" of memory, and the foundational role of racial science in disinformation, arguing that minorities are uniquely vulnerable to the circulation of colonial knowledges.

9.6. Section V: The reality lab: Digital tools and human networks in fact-checking

The section examines the future of professional verification through the lens of technology and cooperation. We discuss the future of "check-worthiness" detection, advocating for proactive AI systems that predict virality rather than just reacting to claims. This section introduces innovative projects like *monitorIA*, which uses a "human-in-the-loop" approach to monitor semi-encrypted environments like Telegram, and the DISINFOX platform, which enables European fact-checkers to share standardized reports on transnational influence operations. We explore how the "epistemic community" of fact-checkers uses chatbots and "epistemic filters" to engage audiences in a platformized sphere. The section also details the ATENA project's use of AI to accelerate triage in security contexts and compares the performance of various LLMs in detecting disinformation in the Slovak language. Finally, we analyze digital activism in public health, using Social Network Analysis to reveal the mechanics of pro-vaccine mobilization in Brazil, and the role of infographics as didactic tools that ensure textual accuracy.

9.7. Section VI: Architecting the future: Ethics, resilience, and sustainable truth

These chapters address the systemic solutions and ethical frameworks needed for a sustainable information ecosystem. We use the "gossiping machine" metaphor to evaluate the ethical tensions in AI verifiers, asking if they act as "predators" or "pollinators" within the ecosystem. This section explores participatory media literacy interventions involving video game designers and social media influencers and the use of "gamified media literacy" to "inoculate" users against manipulative tactics. We discuss the "B2B turn" in fact-checking, where organizations seek economic sustainability beyond platform funding by selling data and expertise to corporate clients. This section advocates for the use of AI and economic incentives, including blockchain for content provenance, to align the interests of producers and consumers. We conclude with reflections on the role of journalists as gatekeepers who must "vaccinate" the public with real journalism and a case study of state-led strategic communication on Facebook to counter electoral disinformation. Together, these chapters remind us that reality is not a static given, but a collective achievement that requires constant defense and technological innovation.

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SECTION I:

Living in the Fog: Philosophical and Rhetorical Foundations of Reality

SPECULATIVE ATTITUDE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH: A DISCUSSION ON THE WEAKENING OF FACTUAL TRUTH CONSCIOUSNESS IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, democratic institutions worldwide have demonstrated growing concern regarding the challenge of disinformation. The European Union (EU), for instance, has introduced a series of strategic frameworks to combat the spread of false information, including the Action Plan Against Disinformation (2018), the European Democracy Action Plan (2020), and the Democracy Defence Package (2023). These measures aim, to ensure that citizens make well-informed political choices, both in everyday situations and at decisive moments for democracy. On another level of intervention, according to García-Guitián et al. (2024), such measures ultimately seek to address the phenomenon of post-truth, a deeper structural problem in contemporary societies.

According to W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston (2018), the social condition of post-truth reflects "the daunting mix of institutional decline, public sphere disruptions, and the growing attacks on journalism and enlightenment values" (p. 134). The authors point out that the crisis of democracy coincides with the crisis of truth. As Steve Tesich (1992) argues, the tragedy of democracy is that the truth has lost its social and democratic significance.

According to Hannah Arendt (1967), the consciousness of truth provides a sense of orientation in a constantly changing world. It means that truth enables a more enduring understanding of reality – one that changes slowly and safely. In this sense, communicating the truth, as Eugênio Bucci (2018) points out «helps citizens to modulate their expectations regarding the near future»[1] (p. 23). Post-truth, by contrast, erodes this sense of orientation and security within a reality mediated by digital communication technologies. This effect

[1] All quotations originally in other languages have been translated into English by the author of this study.

of disorientation is dispersed throughout society, with each individual constructing their own «version» of the truth. As a result, truth loses its democratic and social principles. According to Manuel Arias-Maldonado (2020) «post-truth does not designate a society where nobody believes in truth, but rather one where people tend to believe in their own truth» (p. 75).

Given the relevance of the topic, this article examines the social reproduction of the post-truth phenomenon, with particular emphasis on its speculative disposition. Rather than framing it as a deterministic relationship, the analysis adopts a dialectical perspective. It considers the possibility that individuals shaped by neoliberal social practices are capable of reproducing market logic in non-economic instances (Brown, 2019), such as in the social process of truth production. Accordingly, this study identifies certain correspondences between the speculative attitude prompted by neoliberal social practices, particularly the financialization of everyday life (Langley, 2020; Pellandini-Simányi & Vargha, 2020; Tygstrup, 2016), and the speculative attitude that permeates post-truth epistemologies (Cesarino, 2021; Rudloff et al., 2023). In this way, post-truth is framed as a complex and structural issue in contemporary societies, one that goes beyond the problem of disinformation.

2. POST-TRUTH

Steve Tesich (1992) uses the term post-truth for the first time to define an emerging nihilism within American society. Starting from the premise that the government educates its citizens by example, the author suggests that the failure of democratic institutions to restrain the dishonest discourse of political leaders functioned as a pedagogical model, leading ordinary people to emulate similar behavior to the extent that they ceased to care about truth. Tesich ironically describes this situation as a memory lapse to highlight the social condition in which people and their leaders abandon their commitment to truth without feeling any sense of shame. In his perspective, the social condition of post-truth resulted from the atrophy of citizenship and the nihilism of the political citizen. According to Tesich (1992),

> All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world (para. 7).

Although truth may lose its previous normative significance, the awareness of truth and facts does not cease to exist. If that were the case, why would falsehoods be deliberately disguised as «alternative facts» to confer legitimacy (Sinderbrand, 2017, para. 43)? And why would the social network TruthSocial, whose founder Matthew D'Ancona (2017) characterizes as «the first Post-Truth President» (p. 11), bear the word «truth» in its name? These examples illustrate that individuals, endowed with cognitive

capacity and agency (Giddens, 2003), continue to engage in alternative social processes of truth production, even if those processes belong to the domain of post-truth. They also indicate a prevailing tendency to instrumentalize the values of truth and facts based on individualistic rationality.

Liesbet van Zoonen (2012) conceptualizes this social change as «*I*-pistemology» (p. 57): a mode through which individuals construct their own narratives of truth based on the collection of scattered evidence encountered through personal life experience. The inconsistencies that intuitive and additive reasoning fail to reconcile are, in turn, addressed through conspiracy theories and their hidden causal links. According to Letícia Cesarino (2021), the emergence of *I*-pistemology has been facilitated by the «chaotic opening of truth-production processes and their dispersion across an expanding digital landscape» (p. 93). This social change is further intensified by the increasing deregulation of the «system of experts» (Cesarino, 2021, p. 74) responsible for producing truth within liberal democracies, such as journalism and historiography. This group of «experts» adheres to a professional code of ethics based on rational discourse and scientific methods, which is not necessarily the case with *I*-pistemology.

Note that individuals still believe in the reality of facts, and truth does not lose its relevance in the post-truth era. However, the social construction of facts and truth is undergoing a transformation, becoming increasingly vulnerable to market logic. With the advance of financialization into the various spheres of human life, according to Wendy Brown (2019), «nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation» (p. 8). A dynamic that extends even to the values of truth and fact. For instance, individuals may evaluate the risk of believing in something through a cost-benefit rationality or according to hyper-individualistic criteria, thereby diminishing the authority of democratic institutions tasked with «regulating» truth. The parameter of individual utility is thus emphasized in the consciousness of truth and facts. According to Rudloff et al. (2023),

> Prior research has shown that post-truth epistemic beliefs are embedded in a broader personality disposition, the Dark Factor of Personality (D). It is defined as "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility – disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others – accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications". Utility refers to various forms of material success, but also includes rewarding feelings, such as power or pleasure. Moreover, utility does not necessarily refer to actual mid- to long-term benefits (e.g. economic prospering or well-being), but rather perceived benefits resulting from ethically questionable behavior (e.g. feeling superior to others) (p. 2).

According to Lucia Santaella (2018), confirmation bias constitutes a homophilic disposition in which individuals preferentially accept information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. The concept of post-truth, however, should not be misconstrued as a mere intensification of confirmation bias. Nor should it be equated with the political use of lies. Although post-truth does entail the instrumentalization of falsehood and the narrative strategies employed by spin doctors, as Manuel Arias-Maldonado (2020)

observes, «post-truth brings something else» (p. 66). In at least one of its interpretative dimensions, this "something else" denotes an attitude that involves evaluating risks and engaging in speculation regarding the value of truth and factuality. This disposition becomes evident in the analysis of the two examples that follow.

Aron Banks, a businessman and prominent advocate for the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, financed the «Leave.EU» campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum. Reflecting on the campaign's success, he evaluates that «the Remain campaign [the opposition] featured fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You've got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success» (Booth et al., 2016, para. 10). So, to achieve the goal of winning the election, the campaign deliberately constructed a political discourse that was acknowledged to be deficient in factual accuracy. However, this does not imply that its protagonists and supporters perceived themselves as liars. In another situation, Kellyanne Conway, former advisor to President Donald Trump, contested the account presented by journalists by referring to «alternative facts to that» (Sinderbrand, 2017, para. 43). The controversy centered on whether the crowd at Trump's first inauguration was the largest ever recorded. By acknowledging that there are no means «[to] prove those numbers one way or the other. There's no way to really quantify crowds» (Sinderbrand, 2017, para. 64), Conway implicitly concedes that the fabrication of alternative facts serves a utilitarian purpose, advancing the interests of a particular individual or political group.

These cases expose a fundamental contradiction inherent in the social condition of post-truth: individuals simultaneously deny or distort factual information while sincerely believing they are communicating the truth. This suggests that the values of thuth and fact do not cease to exist but the social response to these significant symbols has changed (Cesarino, 2021; Rudloff et al., 2023). They have become tied to the risk assessments and cost-benefit criteria characteristic of market logic, to the detriment of their role in serving public enlightenment.

One of the most detrimental consequence of this social change is the fragmentation of the social constitution of reality (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It is not a case of a shared reality contested by opposing sides through discursive confrontation over the narrative construction of truth. Indeed, it involves the creation of radically divergent worldviews, each constituted according to its own internal reasoning. Such a rupture, or inflection point, is both a cause and a consequence of communicative incompatibility, which impedes dialogue between groups and, in turn, exacerbates societal polarization (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Gonçalves-Segundo, 2022).

3. FINANCIALIZATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The advance of the economic domain over other spheres of human life is manifested, among other facets, by the financialization of everyday life. According to Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty (2014), this phenomenon means «not (or not just) that the finance sector is getting bigger, but that financial ways of calculating are becoming more pervasive

socially» (p. 891). In contemporary contexts, this dynamic is reflected in the proliferation of financial practices embedded in daily routines, which give rise to a distinct form of financialized consciousness – one that assesses the value of things by their risk and future rate of return (Martin, 2014).

The financialization of everyday life, nonetheless, is not a novel phenomenon. According to Brett Christophers (2015), finance has long been embedded in social life and periodically assumes a position of prominence. Financial expansion is thus a recurrent feature of capitalism. In this regard, Léna Pellandini-Simányi (2021) argues that contemporary forms of financialization «may be better understood as shifts in the modalities and areas of financial logics that have cross-cut everyday life well before neoliberalism, rather than being brand-new phenomena» (p. 282).

Neoliberalism, however, infuses the advance of financialization into social life with a distinct ideological function: the individualization of the costs and risks related to social reproduction (Harvey, 2011). In response to economic cutbacks and downturns, individuals and households are increasingly compelled to seek alternative sources of income, encountering a range of financial products that primarily offer individualized mechanisms for financing these costs (Brown, 2019). Consequently, these financial dynamics are perceived as forms of security. According to Paul Langley (2020), this social change is framed "as opportunities to be embraced via the markets by entrepreneurial investor subjects who seek to secure their future wealth and wellbeing (p. 70). Understood in terms of security, financial investment addresses future uncertainties in the present, and the financial techniques and tools individuals learn to use in their daily lives serve this purpose: «render the future actionable in the present» (Langley, 2020, p. 70).

On the other hand, the emphasis on future profit makes the inherent risk in financial markets unavoidable. As Léna Pellandini-Simányi and Zsuzsanna Vargha (2020) note, «credit used for goods that may generate future gains (e.g. mortgages, student loans) almost loses its credit-like character, becoming a saving or an investment» (p. 4). In this context, the alarming rise in debt – the most evident harmful outcome of the imbalance between security and risk mediated by financialization – assumes a moralizing function, insofar as individuals recognize the credit-debt relationship as «a more noble form of self-sufficiency» (Martin, 2014, p. 205). According to João Rodrigeus (2022), there is a disciplinary aspect implicit in the perception that «individuals declared free, because immersed in supposed competitive market processes, would learn to approach choices through the lens of pecuniary gain and always under exclusive responsibility» (p. 70).

It is important to note the dialectical relationship between the economic and social processes underpinning the financialization of everyday life and the emergence of a hyper-individualized lifestyle, strained by intensive competitive dynamics, in which individuals internalize market logic. In this context, social practices shape individuals; and individuals, endowed with a sense of agency, reciprocally participate in these social practices, for example, by representing the social role of guarantor of the means necessary for their personal development and that of their dependents (Giddens, 2003). As David Harvey (2011) argues, the daily practices of individuals who become

entrepreneurs of themselves must align with neoliberal ideals – and, conversely, those ideals are reinforced through such practices –, particularly the «rhetoric of individual freedom, autonomy, personal responsibility, and the virtues of privatization, free markets, and free trade» (p. 16). Neoliberal discipline thus generates its own motivations and satisfactions, grounded in market logic, and consequently expropriates alternative modes of affect that deviate from this logic (Safatle, 2015).

4. SPECULATIVE ATTITUDE OF POST-TRUTH

The internal logic of global financial structure, with its futures markets and derivative instruments, corresponds, in a certain way, with Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) argument regarding the State's omission in the context of liquid modernity. In a social context where the State no longer guarantees a collectivist-based safety net, risk proliferates as a commodity, and individuals become responsible for constructing a private safety net for themselves and their dependents, grounded in self-interest. This social change manifests not only in increasingly atomized modes of living but also in the growing entrenchment of a speculative attitude. After all, confronted with a reality marked by uncertainty and volatility, individuals tend to embrace speculation as a driving force and vital attitude for engaging with the future.

In the context of financial markets, the concept of speculation primarily refers to the act of profiting from volatility. According to the glossary of *The Economic Times* (n.d.), «speculation involves trading a financial instrument involving high risk, in expectation of significant returns. The motive is to take maximum advantage from fluctuations in the market» (para. 1). While the act of investing requires a high degree of certainty and security regarding the asset being traded, the act of speculating presupposes, by definition, the absence of certainty – profit derives precisely from the volatility of the asset (Zweig, 2016). In this sense, financial speculation entails a certain level of abstraction – a detachment, to some extent, from what is real and feasible. According to Frederik Tygstrup (2016), «whatever forms it [speculation] takes, however, it invariably departs from certainty in order to embark on possibility, virtuality, futurity» (p. 97).

Earlier economic models were likewise permeated by an abstract dimension, from the fetishism of commodities and the symbolic representation and guarantee of monetary value to the fiction of gold's intrinsic worth. Yet, the global financial structure, with its futures markets and derivative instruments, assumes a particularly fictional aspect by pricing a model (a commodity) of the future, which financial agents can trade and capitalize on (Shaw & Reeves-Evison, 2017). Accordingly, a reciprocal relationship emerges between speculative disposition and the precarious condition of volatility in these (fictional) financial operations – an interplay that also illuminates key aspects of the social condition of post-truth. According to Tygstrup (2016):

> When the present is increasingly engrained with virtuality, and the more we bet on, issue promises for and insure our contingent futures, speculation increasingly

> emerges from the shadow of the otherwise more robust sense of the real and becomes a predominant mode of agency and orientation (p. 98).

In the context of post-truth, there is a potential correspondence between this dominant speculative mode of agency and orientation, and the speculative attitude that precedes the fabrication of alternative facts. The negotiation of truth is fraught with risk, and alternative facts function as instruments for securing a «version» of truth that maximizes individual advantage (Barrera et al., 2020). Analogous to the operation of financial derivatives (Bryan & Rafferty, 2014; Norfield, 2012), alternative facts presuppose uncertainty and only result in volatility. Their value remains contingent upon the original commodity, truth, but political actors traded them as a separate entity. In this sense, political actors may speculate on the value of alternative facts to mobilize latent affect within society and garner support (D'Ancona, 2017). Such a strategy endures insofar as the cost-benefit ratio of the «negotiation» remains favorable to the political actor, who thereby absolves themselves of any social responsibility towards the value of truth. According to Barrera et al. (2020), «on average the use of alternative facts increases the political support of the politicians irrespective of fact checking, which explains why politicians use alternative facts despite facing the risk of being fact checked» (p. 2).

This disengagement of accountability, however, is not exclusive to political actors. Empirical research suggests that society, or part of it, is undergoing a process of normalization of hateful, prejudiced, and deceptive discourse (Valentim, 2024; Wodak et al., 2021). As previously argued, individuals actively participate in the construction of truth, even if those processes belong to the domain of post-truth. Indeed, the democratic imperative articulated by Arendt (1967), that freedom of opinion must be bound by factual truth, appears increasingly incompatible with the social conditions of post-truth, wherein the values of truth and fact are rendered fungible and, consequently, instrumentalized by market logic.

5. CONCLUSION

The relevance of examining the phenomenon of post-truth in conjunction with the advance of financialization into social life lies precisely in understanding how the social processes established by neoliberalism can shape a weakened form of truth-consciousness, permeated by market logic, and, dialectically, how individuals participate in these processes. Therefore, the perspective advanced in this article conceives post-truth as a complex and structural issue in contemporary societies, one that transcends the problem of disinformation.

This analysis does not articulate a direct causal link between the current crisis of truth and the socio-economic phenomenon of the financialization of everyday life, nor does it claim that post-truth emerges as a consequence of a «financialized» consciousness. Instead, it seeks to identify points of correspondence that brings these phenomena into analytical proximity, allowing for a deeper understanding of both. In this regard, one can discern

a relationship between the precarious volatility of liquid modernity and the speculative attitude cultivated within individuals – a correlation that also sheds light on the social condition of post-truth.

The central analogy suggests that post-truth constitutes a regime in which the social production of truth is deregulated, and its value is instrumentalized through market logic. To facilitate these dynamics, truth must be decoupled from the rigidity of «factual matter» (Arendt, 1967, para. 14) – which provides a degree of stability and predictability – and, consequently from the institutions that traditionally «regulate» factual truth, such as journalism and historiography. Simultaneously, there is an unregulated opening of the processes of truth production and their fragmentation mediated by digital technologies (Cesarino, 2021). Within this post-truth condition, the value of «truth» no longer resides in its democratic or social significance, but rather in the «profit» it can generate for the interests of an individual or a political group, thereby highlighting the speculative disposition individuals adopt toward this value.

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BEYOND FACT-CHECKING: A CONTESTIVIST APPROACH TO DISINFORMATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The post-truth era is as much about defining truth as a concept as it is about identifying which truth is *the* truth. On one hand, many still subscribe to the idea of a singular, objective reality that can be accessed with the right epistemological tools. On the other hand, a pluralistic approach that embraces equally valid realities, where the positivist lens is just one of many, is becoming an increasingly acceptable explanation for our current social configuration. Truth is not just debatable; it is experiential — personal, even. Reality has reproduced itself into fractured, competing versions depending on the observer, and as a result, discourse has morphed into a shadow of its former constructive self.

When faced with this postmodern iteration of meaning, we grasp for explanations as to why others seem so committed to "wrong" realities, and we typically reach for one of three frameworks: pathology, strategy, or machinery. And they're not enough.

Pathology explains epistemic deviance as individual dysfunction, caused by cognitive failures, from bad heuristics to poor education. This locates the problem in the person, bringing forth appropriate interventions like media literacy and inoculation against false beliefs. Strategy blames individual agency, where people rationally engage in disinformation for personal gain. This framing is carried through the proposed fixes, such as combating information interference and manipulation. Machinery sees the problem as a systemic product, where algorithmic influence and institutional authority are understood as creating the necessary conditions for a post-truth reality. This explanation calls for structural and regulatory solutions, including platform regulation and anti-trust action against technological monopolies.

What if all three explanations miss something more fundamental? Many draw upon some or all of these frameworks to create comprehensive solutions to the multiple reality "problem," which itself points to something more foundational that operates underneath these interpretations of the issue. What if people are motivated by something deeper:

the existential need to maintain their very being by projecting meaning? And what if the emergence of competing realities isn't a breakdown of rational discourse or a failure of information systems, but the inevitable result of human beings asserting their right to exist *meaningfully* in this world?

This is the starting point for contestivism: a paradigm that views social reality as perpetual contestation of meaning through and for power, where the stakes are nothing less than being itself. Rather than treating competing worldviews as pathology to cure, strategy to counter, or machinery to reconstruct, contestivism recognizes them as expressions of the fundamental human drive to defend meaning as a condition for existence.

The paradigm reveals the structural grammar underlying all meaning contests — including the very debates about truth and reality that define our current moment. It provides analytical tools for understanding how meaning emerges, stabilizes, and transforms without requiring us to adjudicate which meanings are "correct" or assign moral judgment to their proponents. Most importantly, it acknowledges that these contests aren't peripheral to social life — they are social life.

This paper develops contestivism as both a theoretical framework and an analytical lens, demonstrating how it can illuminate phenomena from disinformation to political polarization to social change. By understanding social reality as perpetual contestation rather than fixed truth or infinite relativism, we gain tools for understanding the post-truth era not as a symptom of an underlying problem, but as an inescapable condition of human society.

2. DEFINITION

Contestivism is a paradigm for understanding and investigating social reality as a perpetual contestation of meaning through and for power. It spans the domains of truth, value, and reality, and operates across multiple scales of organization through various modes of power. The paradigm begins with the foundational assumption that meaning is a necessary condition for being in the human sense. Its scope, therefore, goes where human meaning-making goes. To establish meaning, people, groups, and cultures assert power — and claim power by doing so — ensuring their continued physical and semantic existence. Under contestivism, power is both the means to and the end of meaning.

This framework expands the mechanism of sensemaking by viewing it as a simultaneous, constant, and interrelated web of epistemic, axiological, and ontological assertions within and beyond social orders. This allows it to accommodate complexity and explain the limitations of one-dimensional interventions in social, political, and cultural life. The paradigm also views the emergence of meaning not as concluded synthesis or resolution, but as a momentary stabilization, always under threat of contestation.

Finally, contestivism is self-reflexive: It necessarily performs itself by entering the very contest it theorizes and staking its own claim to legitimacy among existing paradigms of the social world. Contestivism offers its own definition of truth, one that is bounded by its understanding of the broader reality, and, like any paradigm of its scope, prioritizes meaning-bound existence as the requisite for its definition of humanity. This self-awareness distinguishes it from paradigms that claim neutral observation while obscuring their own axiological commitments.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Through the contestivist lens, meaning determines not just mere humanity, but the very material and metaphysical existence of said humanity. To lose meaning is to cease to be human. Divorcing yourself from meaning separates you from all ideas, including your concept of the self. Losing control of your meaning, like having the legitimacy of your existence questioned or denied, can also lead to existential decay. Neither is tenable for any intelligent being.

If you do not claim your meaning, you forfeit it, leaving room for others, and the structures within which they function, to claim it for you. The very act of sense-making demands erecting boundaries, necessarily creating inclusions and exclusions, since meaning is equally about what something is not as it is about what something is. And that meaning could very well not include you. The inescapable crux of humanity is to claim it.

To contest.

The relationship between meaning, being, and power has been explored in fragments across traditions, but rarely synthesized into a recursive framework. Foucault (1977, 1980) demonstrated how meaning is shaped by power, not just by institutions, but also individual micropractices that show a glimpse of agency. Heidegger (1927, 1962) foregrounded being as a lived and interpretive condition, Dasein thrown into a structure of situated possibility rather than a metaphysical essence. While this concept emphasized that to be is to interpret one's place in a world of socially shared meanings, he did not theorize meaning as structurally contested or power-mediated, missing the element of power that is inherent in the process and rules of interpretation. Social constructivism, particularly through Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work, would later theorize how reality itself emerges through collective meaning-making processes, demonstrating that what we take as objective social facts are actually sedimented products of human interpretation and interaction. However, constructivism typically treats this process as collaborative knowledge-building rather than contested struggle, missing the power dynamics and existential stakes that drive meaning construction. Later, Taylor (1994) would frame identity as dependent on social recognition, but likewise stopped short of modeling how recognition itself occurs within a structure of power.

Butler's (1990, 2004) performativity theorized being as a construction through the performance of normative, power-laden meaning systems, thereby creating an illusion

of existential stability. Contestivism extends Butler's framework with a systematized mechanism of the being-meaning-power nexus, complete with the necessary tensions of competing for legibility in a finite but flexible meaning economy shaped by the push-and-pull between agency and structure.

It is important to clarify that contestivism is interested in people's relationship with reality through meaning, not with objective reality itself. The paradigm investigates how humans construct, contest, and navigate meaning as their primary mode of engaging with the world, without making claims about the nature of reality independent of human meaning-making.

3.1. Contestation defined

To understand contestivism, we must first define what contestation is. What it is not is mere reactionary disagreement or resistance. Nor is it a superficial act of self-expression or social defiance, but instead a struggle for meaning to sustain being. Much of this contestation stems from the fundamental need to align meanings between the world and oneself. When there is significant decoupling between how you understand your own meaning and how the world recognizes it, existential risks emerge from both directions. Too great a divergence threatens both internal coherence and external legitimacy, driving the need to contest — either to bring the world's understanding in line with yours, or to adjust your own meaning to maintain viable social existence.

At its core, contestation is the foundational act that enables meaning to emerge and being to persist. It is the active process by which individuals, groups, or structures assert, defend, challenge, or even reconfigure meaning in relation to others — through power. It can take the form of thought, speech, silence, visibility, exclusion, or even withdrawal. What matters is not the form it takes, but that it functions as a relational claim on what truth is, what matters, and what is possible.

Contestation can be internal or external, deliberate or unconscious. But it is always active, whether it is performed with full awareness or not. It always exerts something on the broader meaning economy. In essence, intent is irrelevant. Action — or inaction — is all-important. It is always happening, despite appearances of indifference or withdrawal. It is always relational, in that meaning is formed by considering all others out there and situating it within or beyond boundaries. It is always tied to being, for that is the very motive that drives its actors to engage in contest.

3.2. Forms of contestation

Contestive forms, or stances, include both assertion and concession, two seemingly opposite moves that are, in fact, both active expressions of meaning. Assertion is the act of projecting one's meaning outward, claiming space in the turbulent waters of competing understandings of reality. Concession, by contrast, is the act of stepping

back, ceding ground, or allowing another meaning to dominate. Even this, however, is an act of positioning, a relational signal that still engages the meaning economy. It's a conscious decision to relent or abandon ship, only to contest in a more favorable social current, or come back with a different calibration of one's meaning. In contestivist logic, domination or oppression of meaning is less important than the very acts that enable such configurations of power to begin with. Throughout history, we have seen a predictable progression of meanings, where contestations evolve into a kind of temporary Hegelian synthesis, offering both thesis and antithesis, but also neither of them and better than them. Similarly, we have witnessed cyclical bouts of regression, where, almost like clockwork, the same battles are fought, only by different actors, seemingly oblivious to the ghost of contests past.

3.3. Temporality of meaning

Contestivism assumes the nature of meaning as transitory. What we recognize as conclusions or resolutions of arguments are, in fact, fleeting stabilizations that emerge from specific arrangements of power at any given time. Ideas are never fully synthesized, nor contestations concluded. They are mere suspensions of opposition while the underlying mechanics remain ever active. Meaning is established, destroyed, and reconfigured through a dynamic process.

Some meanings may be more stable than others, but their very dominance summons challenge. Not only is meaning temporary, but it is also vulnerable. Hegemony invites counter-hegemony. Marginalization invites resistance. Individual conceptions of reality are susceptible to new external information, and therefore new internal contestation. Paradoxically, our internal drive as a species to seek stability in everything, including meaning, is what sets the gears of contestivism in motion, specifically because we want our own meaning to be the one to achieve the permanence we pursue. The human desire for stability is the very thing that catalyzes instability.

3.4. Mechanics of contestation

The agency that is afforded to every individual, group, or culture under the contestivist paradigm does not necessarily entail freedom from structural forces. Contestivism is recursive, and the very concept of recursion implies a structure outside the individual, which can influence and be influenced by agency. This means that no point within the process can claim to be the originating driver for contestation.

3.4.1. *Domains of contestation*

The domains of contestation deal with the subject matter: what is being contested. The paradigm identifies three domains of contestation fundamental to the meaning-making

process, which are knowing, valuing, and contextualizing. Three questions often arise when we encounter a fact of life: *Is that true? Is that good or bad? Is that possible?* The contestivist lens assumes these domains are simultaneously engaged in every contestation, with some more pronounced while others are more muted, but present all the same.

A. **Epistemic: Contestations surrounding truth claims**

   This domain is the most basic, prevalent, and obvious area of contestation. The most fundamental dimension of discourse or action represents a stake in what is true.

B. **Axiological: Contestations surrounding value claims**

   This area accounts for often implicit, but sometimes explicit, assertions of what is valuable, moral, or ethical. Axiological claims assess whether something that is deemed true is desirable or not, based on pre-existing commitments to some framework of values.

C. **Ontological: Contestations surrounding possibilities within a given understanding of reality**

   This domain defines the boundaries of reality to which any participant of the meaning economy subscribes, and therefore restricts or opens up possibilities for what could be true or valuable.

Contestivism does not presuppose a sequential or hierarchical relationship between the epistemic, axiological, and ontological domains. Instead of linearity, a network of mutually constitutive relationships exists between the domains of contestation, forming a complex and dynamic web of influence.

Meets →	**Epistemic**	**Axiological**	**Ontological**
Epistemic	—	Knowledge of what is true establishes value systems	Knowledge of what is true constitutes a broader belief system of what can be true
Axiological	Ethical commitments determine what claims are true and what standards of evidence are acceptable	—	Moral commitments help create comprehensive worldviews that establish notions of social reality and order

Ontological	Worldviews set boundaries for what must be true in a given conception of reality to maintain ontological coherence	Worldviews set boundaries for what must be ethical or valuable to maintain ontological coherence	—

3.4.2. *Orders of contestation*

Under this paradigm, orders refer to the scales of social organization between which contestation occurs: individual, social, and cultural. These orders can be directed internally or externally, such as within a person or between people, within or between groups, and within and across cultures. Similar to the subject matter of contestation, the question of who engages in contest also creates an interconnected web of relationships where orders exert influence on one another.

Meets →	**Individual**	**Social**	**Cultural**
Individual	—	Reshape group norms to accept individual expression or reinforce them to reject it	Reshape cultural ideas to accept individual meanings
Social	Group norms mold individual notions of meaning and establish the positionality of the individual within the group	—	Group norms influence the cultural logic of society
Cultural	Culture-level ideology is internalized by individuals within the social system	Cultural meanings filter down to groups and determine the hierarchy and organization of said groups	—

3.4.3. Power modes of contestation

It is equally crucial to theorize the modes of power used to project meanings into the wider environment. Tracing its roots in critical theory, contestivism approaches contestation as occurring in the form of hegemony or counter-hegemony (resistance). However, the paradigm also understands that a third mode is necessary to explain contests fully. Assimilation identifies complicity in hegemony, at least temporarily, until the complicit become part of the hegemonic mass. This explicitly names a previously unnamed method of power projection that does not seek to establish dominance, but does not seek to resist either. This third mode identifies internalized oppression, where contestation is directed inward to replace internal meaning and align with the hegemon.

Not unlike the domains and orders of contestation, power modes are also conceptualized as having influence on one another. The essence of contestation is to shape reality through the transfer of meaning, and therefore action — and reaction — are crucial components in this paradigm. Contestivism theorizes power modes as mutually constitutive, engaged in a never-ending push-and-pull with each other. Unlike the relationships described in the contestive domains and orders, intersecting modes of power result in multiple outcomes — a crossroads of action — influenced by all other meanings in a given space and time. The modes thus become separated from the simpler recursive logic of the other grids due to their nature.

Meets →	**Hegemony**	**Resistance**	**Assimilation**
Hegemony	—	Intensify or fracture resistance	Adopt hegemonic meaning or be forced into resistance
Resistance	Soften hegemony through flexibility or enforce ideological rigidity	—	Arrest or accelerate assimilation
Assimilation	Influence hegemonic meaning from inside or trigger ideological purification	Influence counterhegemonic meaning from inside or trigger ideological purification	—

3.5. The engines of meaning and being

Imagine the three grids — domains, orders, and power modes — and fold them up into a cube. This creates the **engine of meaning** within contestivism. This engine provides

the structure that determines all possible forms of contestation at any given time, in any given space, with semantic boundaries that are both real and manipulable through the very contests we engage in.

Nested within is another cube — the **engine of being**, which portrays the agentic contestations that we perform as individuals, groups, or cultures, through our chosen power modes, and across all domains. This is the arena where we stake our claim in meaning, bound by the limitations afforded to us by the existing engine of meaning. Contestivism is free agency within a structured economy. But this structure is not set in stone. Every iteration of meaning at the agentic level courses back through the broader structure — pushing its limits, refining its contours, and remaking it into the shape of power.

Being itself can be visualized as a Rubik's cube. It can be arranged in a vast but finite number of ways through different physical moves and color combinations, but the cube is always there, regardless of its configuration. Similarly, being is a constant in the social sense, what changes is how it is configured at any given moment. The moves (orders and power modes) and colors (domains) represent agentic contestation that is always in search of a solved state just like one would a Rubik's cube. This state is never reachable but always imperative; even when reached, the next turn of the engine of meaning can easily scramble what was hard-fought and hard-won.

The construction of the cube regulates what colors and moves are possible within the semantic physics — except new moves and colors outside of what the structure permits can still be made, allowing for a reconstruction of the cube where different meanings and relationships can be contested into social existence. Every contestation is an opportunity to remake the structure ever so slightly into one that could make one's meaning legible and legitimate.

3.5.1. Gradients of being

If the engine of meaning defines the frontiers of contestable meaning, the engine of being generates gradients of being. These shades of existence are a function of our contestation and its alignment (or lack thereof) with the wider semantic economy, more specifically, the prevailing hegemonic definitions of what is real, right, and rational. In a meaning-centric, power-mediated conceptualization of human social reality, our being is relational, representative of our legibility as people within society. As such, if meaning is inherently unstable under contestivism, so is being. The precarity comes not from physical threats, but from the positionality of being within ever-shifting semantic configurations made possible by contestation itself.

- **Full being:** Legible and accepted, internal meaning is recognized and aligned with hegemonic meaning.
- **Marginalized being:** Legible and oppressed, internal meaning is recognized by but misaligned with hegemonic meaning.

- **Suspended being:** Illegible and ignored, internal meaning is neither recognized by nor aligned with hegemonic meaning.
- **Erased being:** Illegible to self, ignored by the system, internal meaning is supplanted by meaning willfully adopted from hegemon. The individual pursues social or systemic legibility by sacrificing internal authenticity.

It is important to note that every contestation, representing a turn of the engine of being, produces one version of being out of an infinite number of points along the continuum. The four defined gradients can be considered as ontological markers between which one might land at any given moment, rather than inflexible, deterministic categories of being. Each contest a person engages in creates an opportunity to achieve full being — a relentless pursuit. It is the unchanging, unyielding "why" in this equation that serves as fuel for perpetual contestation.

Therefore, wherever we land on the spectrum of being, we are always contesting. But which way? This takes us back to the forms of contestation, or the stances of assertion or concession. Our position on the continuum shows possibilities for how we might engage in this pursuit. Do we assert to the direction of full being, or concede? The endgame may always be the same, but the path is nuanced, and our actions… ours.

4. CONTESTIVISM AND DISINFORMATION

Current disinformation intervention methods, such as fact-checking, inoculation, and emotion regulation have seen some success in controlled environments but have yet to solve the problem more broadly, demonstrating the possibility that such approaches may be missing the mark. Fact-checking presents competing truths without addressing values or reality concepts. Media literacy and critical thinking education teach people how to evaluate information while disregarding the motivation, or lack thereof, to scrutinize it. Emotion regulation techniques — prompts that insert breaks in the user experience, such as *"This post may provoke anger. Would you like to reflect before sharing?"* — overlook the deeper question of what drives outrage in the first place.

Through a contestivist lens, we can argue that being misinformed can very well be a willful, self-inflicted condition. Truths are accepted not for their uncanny ability to represent reality, but for their alignment with the other dimensions of sensemaking. Contestivism reveals the mechanics of disinformation, in that it persists because it serves more than just epistemic needs; it speaks to deeply-held values and conceptions of reality. The focus needs to shift from correcting false beliefs to understanding meaning contests and creating semantic bridges to bring people together.

4.1. Case analysis through contestivist lens

During the COVID pandemic, we witnessed information consumers intentionally harbor epistemically problematic beliefs en masse because certain truths supported

their morals and reality commitments. Vaccine-hesitant communities dismissed the collective benefit of inoculation because it conflicted with their values of bodily autonomy and individual responsibility, as well as their worldview that entertains the possibility of world governments conspiring to curb personal freedoms. Efforts to debunk disinformation were largely perceived as policing knowledge and embodying increasing state control during a critical period in modern human history. Public health communications emphasized the importance of protecting the collective to those who held completely oppositional values (individual autonomy) and fell flat as expected. The same communities were openly mocked online and offline for deeming the COVID "plandemic" as an entirely plausible idea.

These events, as we witnessed, only fueled resistance to the hegemon of academia and the state. Vaccine-skeptical communities contested their marginalization in the form of alternative facts and contraindicative behaviors as they continued to seek full being in the semantic environment. Five years later, we still encounter people who remain fully convinced that they "did the right thing." Better science and more conclusive evidence on vaccine safety and efficacy have since come out, and yet opinions have not changed, especially among those never directly affected by COVID. This is because axiological and ontological commitments remain despite new information.

4.2. Designing disinformation interventions

In a contestivist conceptualization of disinformation, we effectively break down meaning-making into its constituent dimensions so we can address them individually. This paradigm provides a novel analytical framework from which we can start to rebuild our understanding of the problem and chart our path to a more targeted solution. Here are some tools that we need to consider when designing more constructive methods in combating disinformation.

4.2.1. *Epistemic humility in a contestive social reality*

Labeling something as disinformation is itself a contestive act. It performs exclusionary boundary work on what is considered legitimate and illegitimate knowledge. This can trigger resistance to hegemonic meaning if epistemic humility is not exercised.

4.2.2. *Disinformation as active projection of meaning*

"False beliefs" are not cognitive errors but rather intentional assertions of people's right to exist in the semantic environment. They choose certain facts regardless of epistemic validity to preserve the broader integrity of their internal meanings.

4.2.3. *Multiple dimensions of contestivist meaning*

Information claims contain the semantic dimensions of truth, value, and reality at the same time, all the time. Countering disinformation demands that practitioners consider not just the information at hand but also the axiological and ontological motivations that underpin it. Analyze each claim by asking these simple diagnostic questions.

Domain	**Diagnostic question**	**Example: A policy will reduce poverty**
Epistemic	What does it claim to be true?	The policy will lead to a reduction in poverty
Axiological	What is or can be inferred as the goal?	Reduction of poverty, which implies that less poverty is desirable
Ontological	What does it deem possible, based on a presupposed configuration of reality?	Poverty **can be** reduced through specific policy interventions, and existing structural conditions **allow** such a possibility.

4.2.4. *Power as an ever-present reality*

Every information contest involves questions of who gets to define truth, value, and reality. Understanding how interventions may reinforce or challenge existing power structures can help prevent perverse effects.

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TO SCROLL OR TO TRUST? THE NEW BATTLEGROUND OF TRUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

The typical internet user now spends about 2 hours and 21 minutes per day on social media globally, underscoring the sheer volume of potential exposure to news content within feeds (Newman et al., 2025). Together, these trends suggest that newsrooms and policymakers must meet users where they already are inside social streams while addressing challenges around trust, verification, and the influence of alternative media ecosystems. This article explores how post-truth culture reshapes contemporary debate and news consumption. It examines three interconnected dimensions: the rhetorical and argumentative foundations of post-truth communication; the spread of misinformation and the evolving practices of fact-checking; and recent evidence on trust in news across social media, with a focus on European patterns in 2025. Finally, it discusses the role of news literacy as a crucial yet still insufficient response to the challenges of misinformation.

2. POST-TRUTH AND THE ROLE OF ARGUMENTATION AND RHETORIC IN ONLINE DEBATE

Set against this empirical landscape, a deeper normative question comes into view: who decides the correct or incorrect use of words? Is Rhetoric ethically neutral? One response holds that what can be biased is not rhetoric itself but how we use it. Classical views diverge—Aristotle tends to defend neutrality (with misuse being the moral problem), whereas Plato is more suspicious; Quintilian adopts an intermediate stance (Mateus, 2018, p. 169).

In a similar spirit, Brockriede (2009)—echoing David K. Berlo's popularized idea from 1960—argues that "arguments are not in propositions but in people." He outlines six features of his construct of argumentation: (1) an inferential leap from existing convictions toward adopting a new conviction or strengthening an old one (p. 15); (2) a perceivable warrant for that leap (p. 15); (3) a choice among competing claims (p. 16);

(4) the management of uncertainty (p. 16); (5) a willingness to risk the confrontation of claims among peers (p. 16); and (6) a strongly shared frame of reference (p. 17). In this vein, Serra (2009), Cunha (2009), and Brockriede (2009) emphasize the importance of argumentation, closely linked to Aristotle's rhetorical tradition—centuries-old debates that remain strikingly relevant today.

In an era when opinions often out-sell information, what becomes of argumentation and truth? Public discourse can shape opinion by appealing to emotion, sometimes eclipsing factual reality. From an empirical standpoint, post-truth isn't about denying that facts exist, but about downgrading their importance relative to subjective uptake and interpretation. In A Fragile Truth: What Post-Truth Does to Our Common World (2020), philosopher Myriam Revault d'Allonnes notes that post-truth—the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year 2016—gained traction after the UK's EU referendum and the 2016 U.S. election, where politically charged, emotion-laden discourse often overrode factual reality. This aligns with arguments about the spread of "alternative facts" in networked media and the viral circulation of fake news (Barroso & Estrada, 2018). Rutenberg (2017) and Mello (2020) also discuss "alternative facts" and the rise of populists. The term famously entered mainstream debate in January 2017, around the U.S. presidential transition, when Kellyanne Conway characterized false statements as "alternative facts," raising doubts about the capacity of news media to debunk such claims in ways that partisan audiences would accept (Rutenberg, 2017, pp. 145–146).

McComiskey (2017) argues that the post-truth era is one in which people—especially politicians—say whatever "works" in a given situation, regardless of truth value or facticity. D'Ancona (2018) similarly contends that the essence of post-truth culture lies in the feelings it evokes rather than in evidence; rejecting evidence is, in effect, to opt into post-truth. Importantly, lying is not synonymous with post-truth. Lying presumes expertise and intentional deception—recalling the liar's paradox and Socrates's reflections on manipulation—whereas post-truth concerns the conditions under which audiences prefer narratives that fit identities and emotions over verifiable facts (Barroso & Estrada, 2018, pp. 302–303).

3. FAKE NEWS AND FACT-CHECKING

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as news pieces fabricated with the intention to deceive, whose falsity can be verified. They differ from satire precisely because of their deceptive character and lack of humorous intent (Aymanns et al., 2017; Delmazo & Valente, 2018). Misinformation and online false news, commonly known as fake news, are not a new phenomenon; however, the digital environment—particularly social networks—has significantly amplified their spread, aggravating the social, political, and democratic impact of this problem (Delmazo & Valente, 2018). The viral nature and reach of digital platforms allow fake news to reach large audiences quickly, encompassing diverse social profiles (Bounegru et al., 2017; Delmazo & Valente, 2018). Their mass circulation depends not only on the content itself but also on mediating infrastructures—platforms