

Deceiving Information : *fake news* and conspiracy theories from Antiquity to our days

Disinformation is one of the major problems of the societies of the 21st century, especially where technological means of communication are omnipresent. Despite the awareness of the extent of the phenomenon - in 2016, the term post-truth was even named "word of the year" by Oxford Dictionaries - nothing has been able to stem its spread. Since the publication by the Council of Europe in 2017 of a report in which the authors warned about the seriousness of 'information disorder'¹, we have seen the spread of conspiracy theories during the last US presidential campaign (culminating in the attack on the Capitol by Donald Trump's supporters), the birth of anti-vax movements linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, or the production of innumerable fake news in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

Disinformation is often presented as a direct consequence of the technological innovations of the recent years and the advent of social networks, but it is in fact an old phenomenon, even older than the first half of the 20th century - when the Soviets coined the term *Dezinformatsiya* - where some specialists trace its origin.² Disinformation can be considered as the dissemination of false information with the aim of inducing someone to form an erroneous representation of reality, on the basis of which he or she will be led to make decisions that will prove profitable to the author of this manipulation³. Thus reduced to its essential definition, disinformation clearly appears as a form of deception, which is the object of study of the multidisciplinary and multi-year research project ("Ruse") within the framework of which the present conference is being held⁴. The prism of deception will allow us to deal with fake news, intoxication or propaganda - that is to say, various forms of manipulation through information exercised on others - but also conspiracy theories. Adherence to and dissemination of conspiracy theories do not necessarily imply a desire to manipulate others, but are a matter of deception: those who believe in conspiracy theories are generally fooled by their own - often simplified and Manichean - representation of reality based on a belief in false information, i.e. information that does not correspond to factual reality, which may appear too complex and chaotic to their eyes.⁵

Like all the initiatives of the "Ruse" project, we want to bring together specialists from different disciplines (history, literature, language and communication sciences, psychology, etc.) in order to investigate the different forms that this cunning process has taken over the

¹ "INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making", Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, Council of Europe, October, 2017.

² See : Philippe Breton, *La parole manipulée*, Éditions La Découverte, 2020, p. 63; Vladimir Volkoff, *La désinformation arme de guerre*, Paris : Julliard/l'Âge d'Homme, 1986, p. 14-15; Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski, "Disinformation – Дезинформация (*Dezinformatsiya*)", *The Cyber Defense Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (FALL 2018), p. 21.

³ The definitions given by the dictionaries of the main languages used in Europe and in the Western world in general illustrate this assertion : "Action particulière ou continue qui consiste, en usant de tous moyens, à induire un adversaire en erreur ou à favoriser chez lui la subversion dans le dessein de l'affaiblir" (*Trésor*; cnrtl.fr); " False information spread in order to deceive people" (*Cambridge Dictionary*); "Diffusione intenzionale di notizie o informazioni inesatte o distorte allo scopo di influenzare le azioni e le scelte di qualcuno (per es., dei propri avversari politici, dei propri nemici in un conflitto bellico, e sim." (*Treccani*); "Dar información intencionadamente manipulada al servicio de ciertos fines" (*Diccionario esencial de la lengua española*).

⁴ <https://mshe.univ-fcomte.fr/poles-de-recherche/comportements-risques-sante/axe-2-mecanismes-de-la-prise-de-decision-et-du-changement/559-ruse>.

⁵ Watzlawick Paul, *How Real is Real? Communication, Confusion, Disinformation, Confusion*, New York, Vintage Books, 1977 [1974]

centuries, in different contexts, highlighting in particular the elements of continuity or rupture. Some key notions will be particularly important in this reflection, notably the concepts of narrative and verisimilitude - necessary for the creation and dissemination of credible disinformation - and that of trust (or its opposite: distrust) in the sources from which the information emanates, as it is a key factor in the propagation of misinformation. The aim of this conference is therefore to deepen our knowledge of this particular form of trickery – disinformation –, but it also has a more pragmatic purpose, as we are convinced that the study of disinformation and the way it has been produced, perceived and dealt with over the centuries will provide valuable clues to a better understanding of its current manifestations.

The conference will be subdivided into sessions that will be defined according to the proposals that we will receive and the thematic groupings that they will allow us to make. Like the two previous initiatives of the "Ruse" project, this conference will result in the publication of a volume by the Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté.⁶

TIMETABLE AND SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

The conference will take place between Wednesday 30 November and Friday 2 December 2022 in Besançon.

We accept papers in English, Spanish, French and Italian.

To participate, please send a paper proposal of maximum 200 words to michel.pretalli@univ-fcomte.fr before 15 July 2022.

⁶ M. Pretalli, *Penser et dire la ruse de guerre de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, 2021; *id.*, *Ruse et magie de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, publication expected July 2022.