

SOCIETAL COGNITIVE RESILIENCE AGAINST INFORMATION DISORDERS

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CREATING SOCIETAL
COGNITIVE RESILIENCE
AGAINST INFORMATION
DISORDERS

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Preface

The age we live in is not merely a period in which the channels of producing, distributing, and consuming information are transformed by digital technologies. It is also a moment of rupture that shakes the very foundations of our relationship with knowledge and truth and reshapes how we think. This rupture is not only the result of technological developments but also of the uncertainty created by multiple, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing crises—economic inequalities, pandemics, the climate crisis, wars, and natural disasters. Taken together, these complex conditions push us beyond the question of how we access information and confront us with more fundamental questions: What do we call “true,” and what do we accept as “real”?

We are living in a period in which information knows no boundaries and its circulation is faster, easier, and more intense than ever before. Yet despite this abundance of information, the difficulty we face in accessing reliable knowledge stands before us as one of the major paradoxes of our time. Within this seemingly limitless flow of data at our fingertips, reaching accurate and trustworthy information is perhaps more challenging than it has ever been. The World Economic Forum (2025) also underscored this reality in its Global Risks Report. According to the report, information disorders are regarded as the most significant global risk we will face over the next two years. Misinformation has become a systemic crisis—one that deepens social polarization, threatens public health, and destabilizes democratic processes and social cohesion.

In this new information ecosystem, the boundaries between news and entertainment, truth and hearsay, and reality and fiction are becoming increasingly blurred (Mihailidis, 2014). The term “post-truth”—selected as Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year in 2016—describes an era in which objective facts hold less influence in shaping public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs. Within such a configuration, our capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood and fact from fabrication steadily erodes, while individuals increasingly gravitate toward information that confirms their own preconceptions. As a result, belief and emotion-based understandings of truth come to take precedence over data-driven knowledge. This dynamic is further reinforced by the algorithmic architectures of digital platforms, which generate echo chambers and filter bubbles. In turn, this process deepens societal polarization and further weakens the connection that individuals and communities maintain with truth.

Recognizing the complexity, multidimensionality, and plurality of actors involved, purely technical solutions are not sufficient for addressing information disorders. It is equally necessary to design comprehensive and holistic intervention strategies. In the project titled “Building Societal Cognitive Resilience Against Information Disorders – RESAID” (2023–2026), supported by the European Commission Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence Programme and carried out by Istanbul Bilgi University, we draw attention to the multidimensional nature of “information disorders,” a broad umbrella concept used to define misleading information in today’s information ecosystem. Within this scope, we aim to develop an intervention framework and strengthen resilience among individuals and communities against the threats posed by information disorders.

Within the scope of the project, we situate the intervention strategies to be developed against information disorders within Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In line with this model, we aim to strengthen and support resilience at both the individual level (microsystem) and at institutional and societal levels (meso and macrosystem). This holistic approach lies at the core of our effort to enhance societal cognitive

resilience against information disorders. Thus, the project not only seeks to enable individuals to establish a more conscious and critical relationship with information but also aims to contribute to the continuity and diffusion of this resilience across institutions and society at large.

Within the RESAID framework, we do not approach information disorders as a simple problem of information pollution; instead, we address them through three core lenses. We conceptualize information disorders as a set of “societal problems that violate human rights” because they affect the welfare, security, and freedom of individuals and communities (RESAID Concept Note, 2024). Restricting access to information undermines individuals’ capacity to make free and informed choices. This, in turn, constitutes a violation of the rights to vote and to be elected, as well as the right to participate, all of which are prerequisites for informed democratic engagement. Furthermore, the spread of misleading information regarding diseases and treatment methods directly threatens the right to health. Similarly, targeted disinformation campaigns undermine the right to dignity and reputation, as well as the right to protection from discrimination. In this respect, information disorders are conceptualized as a multidimensional domain of rights violations that is directly tied to democratic participation, equality, and the protection of human dignity. Therefore, adopting a rights-based approach in addressing information disorders is crucial not only to focus on existing violations but also to ensure that proposed solutions do not generate new rights violations.

Second, within the RESAID framework, we approach information disorders as a “human security issue.” Information disorders generate adverse effects across all dimensions of human security, rendering it necessary to discuss this problem through a security lens. For example, in the context of health security, misinformation surrounding vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic increased vaccine hesitancy, endangered public health, and directly violated the right to health. In terms of economic security, false or manipulative financial news can induce panic in markets and negatively influence individuals’ financial decisions. At the societal security level, information disorders undermine social cohesion by fostering distrust and hostility between groups, thereby threatening individuals’ safety. In the sphere of political security, misinformation disseminated during electoral processes destabilizes the legitimacy of democratic procedures and prevents voters from making informed decisions. Moreover, in the context of environmental issues, the spread of misleading information can obstruct accurate understanding of environmental threats and impede preventive measures, ultimately jeopardizing long-term environmental security. In sum, information disorders constitute a multidimensional security problem that endangers individual safety, creates conditions conducive to societal polarization, and weakens democracy.

Third, we examine information disorders through the lens of the “constraining of capabilities.” Building on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach (1979; 1993), we argue that human well-being should not be measured solely by material resources but by the breadth of capability sets—namely, the freedom to determine and realize the actions one is able to undertake. In today’s information society, the right to access information plays a critical role in enabling access to all other rights and in transforming those rights into actual capabilities (RESAID Policy Brief, 2024). In this sense, information disorders constrain individuals’ freedom to access and utilize information that is essential for their well-being. Believing false information can lead individuals to make harmful decisions for themselves and their families and can result in choices that do not serve the public interest. What we are able to do is determined not only by the existence of rights but also by our ability to exercise them. Therefore, the fact that information disorders generate such constraints and

deepen existing inequalities demonstrates the importance of approaching this issue as a capability problem and of developing inclusive intervention models to address it.

One of the core activities of RESAID, the Conference on Resilience Against Information Disorders in the Age of Polycrises, provided a platform that brought together theoretical depth, empirical evidence, and interdisciplinary solutions in this critical field. Held on 24–25 May 2025, the conference opened with a keynote address delivered by Paolo Cesarini, Chair of the Board of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). A total of 21 papers were presented at the conference, 12 of which are included in this book as articles.

In the opening essay of this volume, titled **“Concepts, Parasites, and Immunity Practices in the Information Crisis,”** Can Zeren interrogates the ironic paradox of our time and addresses a vital question: how is it that, despite informational abundance, we find ourselves knowledge-poor, and how can we meaningfully speak of “information disorder”? By bringing Claude Shannon’s Mathematical Theory of Communication into the discussion, the author examines how the technical model of information has sidelined meaning in today’s algorithm-driven digital world. Zeren focuses on how we might strengthen our immunity and critical faculties against manipulation in an environment where uncertainty is commodified and weaponized. To this end, he proposes an educational model grounded in Paulo Freire’s dialogue-based approach, one that prioritizes meaning and resists reduction to mere informational transmission.

In the article titled **“The Problematicization of Misinformation: Global Policy Discourses and Dissemination Dynamics,”** Engin Onuk examines how information disorders are constructed as a policy problem at the global level, evaluating this process within the framework of Policy Diffusion and Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented To Be?” (WPR) approach. The study analyzes the rights-based digital policy model developed by the European Union (EU) to combat information disorders and discusses how this model, although disseminated as a global norm, becomes differentiated and instrumentalized by increasingly authoritarian regimes.

In the article titled **“Information Disorder, Misinformation, and the Devaluation of Truth in Turkish and International Literature: A Bibliometric Comparison,”** İrem Oran compares the thematic and methodological structures of the concepts of information disorder, misinformation, and post-truth in Turkish literature and in international academic literature. The analysis shows that the core concepts are similar in both literatures; however, the international literature displays much higher interdisciplinary diversity, ranging from political communication and artificial intelligence to cognitive processes and health communication, whereas the Turkish literature remains clustered around more limited axes such as political manipulation and pandemic-related processes.

The study by Salih Bıçakçı and Ayhan Gücüyener Evren titled **“An Analysis of Cognitive Security and Disinformation Attack Chains”** examines disinformation as a fundamental threat within the modern security environment, conceptualizing it within a systematic and strategic attack model. The article moves beyond the classical understanding of security and places cognitive security (CogSec) at the centre; that is, the protection of individuals’ cognitive vulnerabilities and decision-making processes against manipulation. The authors conceptualize disinformation not as an instantaneous incident but as a systematic and strategic attack model and analyze this process through a seven-stage disinformation attack chain (disinformation kill chain).

In the thought-provoking article titled **"Is There Weakness in the Essence of Truth, and Deception in the Essence of Power? Looking at the Post-Truth Era in the Light of Hannah Arendt,"** Aylin Kılıç Cepdibi examines the historical condition in which, in the post-truth era, objective realities lose their force when confronted with emotions, drawing on Hannah Arendt's philosophical analyses. The study focuses on Arendt's profound views regarding the tense relationship between factual truths, lying, and politics, and opens a discussion on the importance of judgment and of institutions such as the media and universities for the preservation of the shared world.

In the article titled **"Democracy in the Post-Truth Era: Populism and Polarization in Light of Rising Truth Hegemonies,"** Yakup Furkan Yılmaz examines the crisis of democracy in the post-truth era. The study argues that this crisis is rooted in the dissolution of the "regime of truth," a structure historically constructed by ruling elites within power relations and one that has lost legitimacy. The article highlights how, as institutional knowledge authorities lose their capacity to produce hegemonic narratives, this situation opens space for the rise of alternative "truth hegemonies," which in turn fuels populism and deepens societal polarization.

In the article titled **"Surveillance Capitalism and Democratic Participation: Can Micro-Targeted Political Advertising Lead to Erosion in Advanced Democracies?"** Ara Ege Altınman focuses on the corrosive impact of micro-targeted political advertising, the core business model of surveillance capitalism, on democratic processes in advanced democracies. The study offers a valuable contribution by examining the suppressive effects of such ads, particularly those containing misleading content, on independent voters and individuals who do not vote regularly. The article proposes the hypothesis that this dynamic may lead to democratic backsliding by reducing voter participation.

In the article titled **"The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theories in Turkish Politics: Leadership Discourse, Motivations, and Analytical Frameworks,"** Dilale Öz Dönmez analyzes parliamentary group speeches delivered between 2003 and 2022 to examine how conspiratorial discourse is employed by political elites in Turkey. This comprehensive study shows that conspiratorial rhetoric is used strategically by political actors to reinforce legitimacy, target and criminalize opponents, evade responsibility during crises, and mobilize supporters and that such rhetoric has become institutionalized rather than remaining marginal. The article identifies how conspiracy-laden discourse transforms into a routine political communication tool accompanying democratic regression.

In the article titled **"An Infodemic Constructed Around Security Rhetoric: CHP's Television News and Social Media Coverage of 'Collaboration with Terrorism' During the 2023 Election Process,"** Güventürk Görgülü discusses the infodemic phenomenon in a political context, in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition referring to an excessive circulation of both false and true information that makes access to reliable information difficult during a crisis. This valuable study analyzes the disinformation strategy observed during Türkiye's 2023 general elections as a striking example of a politically manufactured infodemic at the institutional level.

In the article titled **"Assessing AI in Political News Production: A Case Study of AI-Native News,"** Kevser Salih examines the platform NewsGPT, which claims to produce fully automated political news without any human intervention. This study demonstrates that NewsGPT's current model lacks the capacity to autonomously perform core journalistic practices such as multi-source verification,

analysis, and critical inquiry practices that constitute journalism's distinctive professional identity. The article reveals that NewsGPT fails to execute these functions independently.

In the article titled **The Dissemination of Anti-Immigrant Discourse in X (Formerly Twitter) Hashtags: A Social Network and Media Discourse Analysis of the Case of Vezir Mohammad Nourtani, the Miner Killed**, Âdem Kotan examines anti-immigrant discourse and disinformation practices circulating on the X platform in Turkey following the murder of Vezir Mohammad Nourtani, who worked as a miner. Findings indicate that the debate unfolded within two distinct echo chambers, one grounded in human rights-oriented discourse and one grounded in anti-immigrant narratives. The study shows that anti-immigrant groups associated the incident with widely circulated narrative frames such as "silent invasion" and reveals how disinformation was politically instrumentalized in this environment. Beyond these significant findings, the inclusion of such a difficult and sensitive case within this volume is highly valuable as a historical record in this book.

In the article titled **"Instagram Influencers Economy as a Source of Disinformation: A Critical Approach to the Wellness Consumption Culture,"** Öykü Mutlu Çimitay investigates the disinformation risks created by influencers who produce "wellness" content on Instagram through a pilot netnographic study. Analyses indicate that the content produced carries disinformation risks that may lead to body dissatisfaction, inadequate or unbalanced nutrition models, and misleading interpretations of healthy lifestyle practices. This important study, which contributes to understanding contemporary dynamics, draws attention to the responsibility of platform-owning companies and advertisers in addressing disinformation risks generated by the Instagram influencer economy, particularly within the context of the "wellness" trend.

The papers presented at the conference and a selection of those papers included in this volume address the multidimensional nature of information disorders, and the topic has been discussed in an interdisciplinary and multi-layered manner thanks to the contributions of experts from different fields. In this preface, we would like to express our gratitude to everyone who made the conference and this book possible. First, we extend our sincere thanks to İstanbul Bilgi University, which hosted the RESAID Project, and to our colleagues. We also thank the esteemed members of the Scientific Committee—**Bilge Şenyüz, Cengiz Erişen, Emre Erdoğan, Emre Toros, Erkan Saka, Fatih Çömlekçi, Halil Nalçaoğlu, Koray Kaplıca, Lale Şıvgın Dünder, Mehmet Ali Tuğtan, Pınar Uyan-Semerci, Salih Bıçakçı, Sinan Alper, Suncem Koçer, Tuğçe Erçetin Sabuncu, Turgut Tarhanlı, Yasemin İnceoğlu, and Zeynep Şimşek**—for their careful evaluations of the submissions sent to our conference.

We would also like to thank all participants who contributed by sending their work and presenting their papers. We are grateful to **Paolo Cesarini** for delivering the opening speech of the conference, to **Lale Duruiz** for the cover illustration, and to all attendees whose questions and contributions strengthened the discussion environment throughout the sessions.

All papers included in this book provide significant contributions to the field. We extend our sincere thanks to all authors who devoted time, care, and effort under a very tight schedule. Thanks to these contributions, this work has evolved into a comprehensive book that goes far beyond a standard conference proceedings book, reflecting a wide spectrum from theoretical debates to empirical cases. We hope that this study will support academics, policymakers, civil society organizations, and all

other stakeholders in reconsidering our relationship with truth within ethical and critical boundaries in efforts to counter information disorders.

RESAID Project Team

2025

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Can Zeren*

Concepts, Parasites, and Immunity Practices in the Information Crisis

Abstract

This study sets out to question the notion of information disorder in an age where we experience a poverty of knowledge amidst an excess of information. Amid the confusion of familiar concepts, the study focuses on the relationship between information, disorder and uncertainty. It assesses our current condition as an information crisis. Instead of discussing information disorder at the level of content, it invites us to inquire into the systemic functioning of information itself. From this perspective, in addition to intervening in individual pieces of false content, we need to question the energy we expend and the methods we use in the face of systematic falsehood. To this end, the study provides a brief overview of theoretical approaches to the concept of information. Building on Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, which leaves meaning outside, it addresses the fundamental relationship between information, uncertainty and certainty, disorder and order. Introducing the notion of instrumental uncertainty as a driving element of the information order, it engages with contemporary examples and theoretical perspectives. Subsequently, it evaluates the concept of parasite as a critical element in understanding the functioning of information. Parasite, with both its meanings of noise and microorganism, is used to describe the process of humans parasitising themselves through content and systems within the excess, speed, and intensity of information. Drawing on examples from neuroparasitology, parasite is conceptualised both as an inherent element of information and as a form of information order that operates by producing disorder. Following the discussion of parasites, the study explores the relationship between information and immunity through perspectives from immunology and critical theory. Within a framework that ranges from defensive conceptions of immunity to ecological and dialogue-based approaches, it highlights both the infectious conditions arising from false content and systematic falsehood and the neural-cognitive collapse caused by the speed, virality, and excess of information. At this neuroimmunological turn of the information crisis, the concept of critical immunity is proposed as a critical practice against the systematic collapse and falsehood produced by the crisis. Finally, the study highlights the limitations of verification and fact-checking mechanisms in the information crisis and points to the need for active and critical dialogue. Beyond measuring truth and falsehood, it emphasises the recovery of forgotten human values. As a method to strengthen our critical immunity, it proposes Paulo Freire's problem-posing model and emancipatory notion of dialogue. In the information crisis, the practice of critical immunity is thus defined as an effort to establish and expand a space of dialogue that is open to the world, relational, and contributes to the common good.

Keywords

Information, communication, uncertainty, parasite, immunity, crisis

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Introduction

In a world with so much *information*—especially in what we call the information age—how is it that we can still be *knowledge*-poor? How is it that we talk about “information disorder”? Or was there ever a golden age in which information was perfectly orderly? What exactly do we mean by the term “information”? What do we understand by “data”? What do all these concepts signify? Concepts serve as tools for thinking and action. Yet our familiarity with concepts and labels can turn them into seemingly illusory entities that captivate our thinking.

In Turkish, especially in everyday life, we tend at times to refer to data, information, and knowledge simply with the word “*bilgi*.” We are so familiar with these words that we can use them interchangeably. We can easily refer to many things as “*bilgi*.” So, to put it ironically, we are very familiar with information, knowledge, data, or simply *bilgi*. As Hegel famously stated:¹ “What is ‘familiarly known’ is not properly known, just for the reason that it is ‘familiar’” (Hegel, 1910/2003, p. 17). Immediately following this sentence, Hegel continues: “When engaged in the process of knowing, it is the commonest form of self-deception, and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and give assent to it on that very account” (Hegel, 1910/2003, p.17-18).² Henri Lefebvre also refers to this statement by Hegel, which he said could serve as an epigraph to *The Critique of Everyday Life*: “the familiar is not necessarily the known” and to be familiar is to fix, mask, and make real what we assume we know (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 15). Thus, familiarity prevents us from noticing and knowing what is familiar (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 15). The false immunity gained against truth and criticism feeds on familiarity. We live through the mediation of familiar appearances in a high-speed and excessive flow of information. We gradually become familiar with this speed and excess. Is this a society of familiarity, or is society itself already familiar? When everything is familiar, nothing is known.

Naming a period and a situation is to distinguish it from others in a meaningful way. So, is there a period or situation in which information could ever be free of disorder? What is the relationship between information, order and disorder? Can there be information without disorder? Are we looking in the right place for *the disorder* (both as disarray and as dysfunction) we are referring to in terms of information? Is the situation we find ourselves in an ‘information order,’ an ‘information disorder,’ or an information crisis? How can we understand this crisis and its components, and how can we shape our actions in the face of this crisis?

Based on these questions, this study will first provide a brief introduction to the concept of *information* through various theoretical approaches and definitions. Then, Claude Shannon's *Mathematical Theory of Communication* will be included in the discussion. Accordingly, information, grasped in the tension between technique and meaning, will be examined together with concepts such as *order*, *disorder*, *uncertainty*, *signal*, *noise*, and *parasite*. The main argument of this section is that Shannon's technical model of information, which does not concern itself with meaning, has permeated human communication and social communication in today's algorithm-dominated digital world.

¹This is J. B. Baillie's translation. For other English translations see Michael Inwood's (Hegel, 2018, p. 16) and A.V. Miller's (Hegel, 1977/2004, p. 18). German original: “Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt” (Hegel, 1807/1964, p.28).

²This is J.B. Baillie's translation. For other English translations, see Michael Inwood (Hegel, 2018, p.16) and A.V. Miller (Hegel, 1977/2004, p.18). German original: “Es ist die gewöhnlichste Selbsttäuschung wie Täuschung Anderer, beim Erkennen etwas als bekannt voraussetzen, und es sich ebenso gefallen zu lassen” (Hegel, 1807/1964, p. 28).

Subsequently, information will be addressed in the context of crisis, through theoretical discussions centered on the concepts of *parasite* and *immunity*. On the one hand, parasites correspond to noise that disrupts the transmission of information; on the other hand, they correspond to various microorganisms. But how can the concept of parasite function beyond a metaphor when examining types of misinformation and disinformation, described as forms of “disorder”, as well as propaganda, cognitive warfare, information crisis, informational excess and acceleration, and cognitive-psychic collapse? Is a parasite information? What is a parasite in terms of order and disorder? What is a parasite in terms of content and systems? In this section, the relationship between parasites and information will be briefly discussed within the framework of the information crisis. Here, mind-control parasites studied in the field of neuroparasitology will be used as examples to emphasize the process by which humans parasitize themselves in an information order that has reached a state of crisis, both through (dis)information and through the excess and speed of information.

Following the section on parasites, the relationship between information and immunity will be addressed in light of theoretical approaches from the field of immunology. In this context, a brief framework will be provided on the different ways in which immunity is understood, covering the theoretical transformation from a defensive view of the immune system to new approaches based on ecological dialogue. Building on this, this section will also explore the possibilities offered by the concept of immunity in the information crisis. The inaccuracy and virality of content do not merely infect us. Today, the speed and excess of information cause damage to our nervous system and cognitive faculties, and lead to their collapse. Within this framework, through a systemic approach to the information crisis, the concept of *critical immunity* will be proposed at this neuroimmunological turning point, drawing on critical theory. In the information crisis, instead of the futility of verification and fact-checking methods, with their mechanical approaches that reiterate similar points, an active and critical dialogue will be suggested. In this context, a theoretical outline based on Paulo Freire’s problem-posing education model and his notion of emancipatory dialogue will be presented as a method to effectively strengthen our critical immunity.

In conclusion, it will be suggested that the information crisis should be approached not only in terms of content but also at the systemic level. In this regard, the current situation will be conceived as an information crisis rather than as a matter of order or disorder.

Information? A Story of Formation?

The main idea running through this study is to set aside an approach to information disorder that is addressed solely through content. In addition to addressing the accuracy or inaccuracy of content, we need to engage in a systemic inquiry.

Naturally, issues such as disinformation are typically addressed within the realms of politics, international relations, war, and similar fields. However, as Ingeborg Bachmann (1983, p. 144) said, just as fascism does not begin with bombs, but with interpersonal and intimate relations, so too disinformation and all forms of information disorder begin in interpersonal relations and even in our relationship with ourselves. For example, the term “*gaslighting*”³, which is frequently used today, finds its counterpart in psychological manipulation in interpersonal relationships as well as in the

³ The term “gaslighting” refers to a type of psychological manipulation and abuse that aims to systematically undermine the victim’s perception of reality and cause them to doubt their own sanity by fabricating a “surreal” atmosphere (Sweet, 2019). The term is derived from the 1944 film *Gaslight*. See also American Psychological Association (n.d.).

psychological warfare technique of the East German secret police and intelligence agency, the Stasi, known as "*Zersetzung*"⁴, meaning decomposition. Additionally, advertisements are among the major examples of disinformation. As Franco Berardi (2019) points out, advertising continuously shapes expectations, realms of imagination, and subconscious dimensions of life in an organized, methodical, and formula-based way; it is the "ubiquitous flow of fake information" that spreads everywhere at every moment (p.90). Yet we are so familiar with advertisements that we do not usually consider them disinformation.

If we focus on individual lies, inaccuracies, and falsities, or remain stuck in debates over what is true or false, our discussion stays at the content level. For a holistic understanding, all situations that could fall under the umbrella of "information disorder" should be addressed primarily at the system level rather than the content level. This is because these disorders are extensions of a system rather than mere pieces of content. What should we understand from this suggestion? What does it mean to examine "information disorders" from a systematic perspective? In fact, as Guy Debord (1994) said, drawing on Hegel, "in a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood" (p.14, thesis 9, *emphasis in the original*), it is emphasized that we need to question the energy and methods we expend within systematic falsehood.

But what exactly is this falsehood? Discussing truth and falsehood at the level of content merely perpetuates our everyday familiarity with the existing order. In a system already familiar to us, which we assume we know, take for granted, or consider fixed and unchangeable, what we call true and false may simply serve to sustain that very familiarity. Even fact-checking practices and verification mechanisms can trap us in a sterile true-false dichotomy in an order that we believe we know and are familiar with. Furthermore, to speak of "information disorder"⁵ requires assuming that there is a moment when information is orderly and that it is possible to return to that moment. However, we can see that information as a process operates alongside disorder and uncertainty.

There is a general hierarchy that progresses from data to information to knowledge. Data is simply unstructured, unorganized, collectable, and storable basic elements that are used for processing and reasoning; they are dynamic traces of events. Information is generally referred to as processed data. As processed data, information is the tool that produces knowledge. This hierarchy is commonly described in terms of the knowledge pyramid.

But what should we understand by information? Information exists in both nature and culture. However, without relations and communication, information does not exist. From a human perspective, information is social (Fuchs, 2022, p.272). Information is socially produced and, although

⁴ *Zersetzung* is a psychological harassment method used by the Stasi in East Germany to neutralize opponents who posed a threat to the state. It involves a personalized campaign of psychological decomposition. Developed to suppress individuals and organizations deemed politically undesirable, this technique targets the weaknesses of the undesirable individual, their family, and their social environment, aiming to damage their reputation through gossip and disinformation and erode their perception of reality through various psychological manipulations. Covert interventions encroach on private life. A climate of fear is created around the individual and their family through systematic harassment. During this process, individuals are discredited, isolated, and their relationships and careers are sabotaged (Grashoff, 2018, pp. 452–455). In short, the targeted individuals are fragmented on a psychological and social level, reflecting the meaning of the term.

⁵ In Turkish, "information disorder" is usually translated as "*bilgi düzensizliği*." The difficulty is that *bilgi* can signify both knowledge and information, a conflation discussed earlier (see p. 1 in this article). Rendering it as *bilgi* leaves it unclear whether knowledge or information is meant, and it obscures the processual character conveyed by the Latin-derived word information (in-formation, in-form). To avoid this ambiguity, the original Turkish article adopted the term *enformasyon*—which also exists in Turkish—to correspond to information, echoing its sense of an ongoing formative process, while reserving "*bilgi*" for knowledge. Accordingly, "information disorder" was rendered there as "*enformasyon düzensizliği*".

it appears ethereal, it is a process grounded in matter (Fuchs, 2020a, pp.90, 99). Information is a material dynamic that shapes systems and is a process that unfolds through social interactions among people (Fuchs, 2020a, p.99; Fuchs, 2016, pp.6-7). Information can be understood as a dynamic process of work and social production through which ideas, meanings, and *knowledge*⁶ products emerge (Fuchs, 2020a, p.100). Information emerges in the intertwined processes of *cognition*, *communication*, and *cooperation* (Fuchs, 2016, p. 7; Fuchs, 2020a, pp. 99-100; Fuchs, 2011, p.89). In the dialectical relationship between these processes, information is "a dialectical process of human work" (Fuchs, 2016, p. 95). Information is not a fixed thing, but a dynamic formation. Information, referring to its Latin etymological root *in-formare*, is a shaping, a process of formation (Fuchs, 2011, p.89). Within human societies, information is the shaping of matter through social communication, production, and cooperation (Fuchs, 2020a, p. 99). In this context, as Fuchs points out, information is a material process in which cognition, communication, and cooperation are intertwined; it is stored in the brain, transmitted and shared among people through various media, and thereby generates transformations at neural, cognitive, intellectual, and social levels that lead to the emergence of new meanings and systems (Fuchs, 2016, pp.6-7). We make use of information by relying on the accumulated body of past social knowledge, and this entire process unfolds within specific historical and social conditions (Fuchs, 2011, p.89). In short, information is a process that is formed by, and in turn forms, social relations.

Another definition that echoes the etymological meaning of shaping comes from Gregory Bateson: Information is "*a difference which makes a difference*" (Bateson, 2000, p. 315, 459). Humans use information, which is a difference, and new differences emerge in matter, in the world, in life, and in themselves. Within a context, difference is a relational process. That is, there is difference at the beginning rather than a void or an ideal moment. The parties involved in a relationship reveal new differences through their encounter with existing differences (Bateson, 2000, pp. 317-318).

When information reaches someone, it creates a difference in them. However, this difference also depends on the recipient's current state when encountering the information. According to Fred Dretske (1981), "information is a commodity that, given the right recipient, is capable of yielding knowledge" (p. 47). Here, the "right recipient" refers to whether people can extract new *knowledge* from the information they encounter based on their existing *knowledge* (Dretske, 1981, pp. 44, 47, 86). In short, according to Dretske (1981), *knowledge* can be understood as "information-caused belief" (p. x) or as "information-produced (or sustained) belief" (p. 86). Another definition that echoes the etymological sense of 'formation' is Luciano Floridi's definition of semantic information: information is "well-formed, meaningful and truthful data" (Floridi, 2005, pp. 366-367).

So, where does "meaning" stand here? Does every piece of information contain meaning? What is the relationship between information and meaning? Are we currently experiencing a loss of meaning in the information crisis? While floating in information, are we forgetting knowledge? Is this a crisis of meaning? A loss of meaning? Is this situation related to the dysfunction and collapse of our capacity to process information? Is it the meaning that makes information information? Or is it the relationship of information with truth that defines it as information? Is there information without disinformation? Is there information without parasites? Is information an order? Or disorder? Or the relation between

⁶ Here, Fuchs uses the phrase "knowledge products" and treats *information* and *knowledge* as part of a developmental process. On the other hand, elsewhere he refers to information as "*social information*" and notes that "social information" is also frequently referred to as "*knowledge*" (Fuchs, 2022, p. 272).

the two? Is a parasite a form of information? Here, the perspective from which we approach information is important.

Behold the Information!: The Ambiguity of Uncertainty

Let us begin with Claude Shannon's *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. This theory offers a technical and syntactic perspective on information. The issue is the efficient encoding, transmission, and decoding of information. Meaning is left out of this theory. In Shannon's (1949/1964) words, "semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem" (p. 31). Semantics deals with meaning, while syntax is formal. In Shannon's theory, the main issue is the efficient and lossless transmission of the signal carrying information from the source to the target through a channel. It is a machine communication theory. It is an engineering problem. Whether information is meaningful at the level of human communication is excluded from this process.

From this perspective, how does information relate to order and disorder, as well as to certainty and uncertainty? Concepts such as probability, entropy, uncertainty, surprise, and unpredictability come into play here. All of these concepts denote situations and processes that are interwoven. According to Shannon's theory, information is quantifiable and based on probability. Information is related to the selection made from a set of possible messages and *the freedom of choice* in this selection. Information refers "not so much to what you *do* say, as to what you *could* say" (Weaver, 1949/1964, p.8, emphases in original). Thus, "information is a measure of one's freedom of choice when one selects a message" (Weaver, 1949/1964, p.9). Here, information is expressed as "a function of disorder or 'surprise'", not of predictability and order (Clarke, 2002, pp.27-28). In fact, information is a process that emerges from the relationship between uncertainty and certainty (Malaspina, 2018, p. 41). Information is tied to freedom of choice, while uncertainty concerns the selection made from the set of possible outcomes within that freedom (Singh, 2013, p. 43). The one who makes this choice is the source from which the message originates. The sender makes a selection from the set of possible messages. The more options there are, the sender's freedom of choice becomes greater; thus, the amount of information increases accordingly, and this also results in increased uncertainty, since selecting one specific message from many alternatives heightens unpredictability (Weaver, 1949/1964, pp. 18-19). Initially, there is unpredictability and uncertainty on the receiver's side before the selection of a message or the realisation of a possible outcome. Consider, for example, a fair coin toss or roll of a die. We cannot know the outcome of these in advance; in other words, there is initial uncertainty. Learning the outcome of the toss—that is, receiving the message—provides information and reduces initial uncertainty. Information is the level of uncertainty that a receiver faces before a message reaches them and that is resolved once the message is received; in other words, it is the level of surprise that emerges depending on how unexpected the message is for the receiver (Mobus and Kalton, 2015, pp.267-268). Coin tosses and dice rolls are *random experiments*. These random experiments have a *sample space*, which is a set containing all possible outcomes (Härdle, Klinke, and Rönz, 2015, p. 69). For example, a fair coin toss has two possible outcomes, while a fair die roll has six possible outcomes. The function that assigns a numerical value, namely, a real number, to each of the possible outcomes of these experiments is called a *random variable* (Härdle et al., 2015, p. 107). In a random experiment, each possible outcome—that is, the value of the corresponding random variable—emerges with a given probability (Härdle et al., 2015, p.107). Before the value of the random variable is known or before the possible outcome occurs or the message reaches the recipient, there is initial uncertainty in the recipient. Entropy can be understood either as a way of quantifying the uncertainty that exists before the message is received (before the value of the random variable is known) or as a way of expressing the amount of information obtained after the message is received

(after the receiver learns the value of the random variable) (Nielsen and Chuang, 2010, p.500). Shannon's entropy reflects the average degree of uncertainty, surprise, and information content intrinsic to the possible outcomes of a random variable (Slutskiy, 2024, p.20); it is an indicator of the uncertainty or randomness present in a signal or message (Danesi, 2013, p.608).

An unpredictable and unexpected outcome has a high surprise value, and the information content of this message is high (Mobus and Kalton, 2015, p.267). However, if the message sent is expected by the receiver, it does not provide new information for the receiver. For example, saying "the weather will be hot tomorrow" in a desert does not tell the receiver anything new because it merely restates a highly probable situation. The level of uncertainty in the receiver is low. The information content of an expected event or message is low. On the other hand, saying "The temperature at the North Pole will be 40 degrees" or "It will snow in the desert" conveys a situation with a very low probability, so the surprise level and information content are high. Therefore, Shannon's theory has a positive understanding of entropy.

In this case, there is uncertainty at the outset. Michel Serres (1982) also states that "in the beginning was the noise"⁷ (p.13). In this technical process, noise is also present as another form of uncertainty. Just as the sender's freedom of choice mentioned above, noise likewise increases uncertainty. This raises the question: 'does noise not also increase information?' According to Weaver (1949/1964), uncertainty that stems from errors or from the effect of noise is regarded as "undesirable uncertainty" (p.19). In this case, the question of whether information and noise are different forms of uncertainty may also be asked (Malaspina, 2018, p.26). Therefore, we can say that there is no information and communication process without noise and uncertainty. There is no noise-free information. However, the issue is the reduction of noise and uncertainty.

We can see that Shannon's information theory echoes the logic of modernity criticized by Zygmunt Bauman. In fact, Bauman explicitly refers to Shannon and his theory in these discussions (Bauman, 1991, pp. 225-226, 228; Bauman, 1999, p.52). The calculability and quantification of information, the exclusion of meaning, the reduction of uncertainty, and the elimination of noise/parasites are reflections of the modern logic of order-building, exclusion, control, and design (Bauman, 1991, pp. 225-226, 228). The aim of this effort to establish order is to eliminate ambiguity and the other defined as parasite (Bauman, 1991, pp. 225-226). The parasite Bauman refers to is actually the weed in the garden, defined according to the logic of modern gardening (Bauman, 1991, pp.15, 20, 69, 100). Bauman's references to Shannon in the discussion of modernity are meaningful in terms of emphasizing the integration of this technical logic of information into society.

Bauman also refers to the concept of "entropy" in his discussions (Bauman, 1999, p. 52; Bauman, 2011, p. 19; 2010, p. 63). According to Bauman, social life is a mechanism that postpones and seeks to counteract the second law of thermodynamics; in other words, it functions as a shelter built to avoid "the curse of entropy" (Bauman, 2011, p. 19; Bauman, 2010, p. 63). In this context, although Bauman does not make explicit reference to it when explaining the logic of modernity, we can argue that he is in fact describing Norbert Wiener—the founder of cybernetics—and his definition of information and

⁷ Serres' statement may be seen as a reference to the opening verse of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, John 1:1). The "word" or "logos" in John 1:1 has been interpreted in various ways as the divine principle and Jesus himself. In this sense, it can be argued that the concept of *logos* signifies the divine order, whereas the "noise" mentioned in Serres' statement points to chaos and disorder.

negative entropy. This is because, while in Shannon information is equated with entropy—understood positively as the expansion of possibilities—in Wiener, information is defined as negative entropy [*negentropy*], that is, a system's capacity to sustain itself in the face of chaos, disorder, and decay (Possati, 2021, p.82). In Wiener's (1961/2019, p. 17) words, the information contained in a system reflects the level of “*organization*”, i.e., order, whereas the entropy of a system indicates its level of “*disorganization*”. Bauman's definition of social life as a protected domain, an arrangement against entropy, coincides with Wiener's understanding of information. According to Wiener (1961/2019, s.223), the persistence of any organism as a whole depends on the means to acquire, use, store, and transmit information. In societies too vast for members to have direct contact with one another, these means include institutions ranging from the press, which includes books and newspapers, to radio, the telephone and telegraph networks, postal system, as well as theaters, cinemas, schools, and churches (Wiener, 1961/2019, p. 223). In Wiener's conception, information in nature and society signifies order in the face of disorder, disintegration, and noise. Interpreting Wiener's conception of information and entropy, Possati (2021) states that noise, equivalent to entropy and chaos, operates as “a parasite that deforms information” (p. 82). The logic of modernity criticized by Bauman is also a logic that establishes order by eliminating noise, parasites, disorder, uncertainty, ambiguity, and everything else it declares to be the other (Bauman, 1991, pp. 7, 24). On the other hand, the modern order-establishing logic defines itself through the negativity of disorder and chaos, while at the same time it depends on them (Bauman, 1991, p. 7). Chaos also amounts to the waste produced by the process of establishing order, which consists of everything declared as the other (Bauman, 1991, p. 100). Thus, it can be said that modern society, as an information sphere, strives to sustain itself against disorder, noise, and the other. On the other hand, contrary to Wiener, in Shannon, both information and noise are forms of entropy, two ends of a continuum, and also statistical phenomena (Possati, 2021, p. 82). Information and noise exist together in a state of becoming.

Thus, Wiener's information—which maintains order in the face of disorder— and Shannon's information—which excludes meaning and is based on uncertainty and probability— are both integrated into social life. Information is a process of formation between order and disorder, certainty and uncertainty. On the one hand, an information order that controls disorder, and on the other hand, a probabilistic flow of information inherently tied to uncertainty, permeate the world in which we seek to grasp meaning.

The Dominance of the Signal and Instrumental Uncertainty

Today, we can see that the algorithmic and hybrid media order, where the value of interaction is increasingly dominant, operates according to the logic of the Shannon model. Today, signal prevails over meaning. Unexpectedness increases information content from a mathematical perspective. The unexpected goes viral on digital platforms. Because the uncertain is surprising. An infinite number of accounts share an infinite number of pieces of content. Each account selects from its own set of possibilities and enters our feed. The feed of our social media accounts emerges from uncertainty. The feed is surprising. We cannot predict which post will follow another. We are exposed to unpredictable posts from the possible outcome sets of each account we follow, multiplied by the number of accounts we follow. As a result, we end up endlessly scrolling. Here, society's order-creating activity comprises both information, understood in Wiener's terms as a struggle against disorder, and uncertainty, understood in Shannon's terms, which is instrumentalized, commodified, and weaponized. To this end, let us turn once more to Zygmunt Bauman:

What was sufficiently spectacular yesterday loses its force of attraction today, unless it lifts to new heights its shocking power. Constantly bombarded, the absorptive powers of the public are unable to cling to any of the competing allurements for longer than a fleeting moment. To catch the attention, displays must be ever more bizarre, condensed and (yes!) disturbing; perhaps ever more brutal, gory and threatening. (Bauman, 1992, p. xx)

In this environment, it can be claimed that political and social meaning is lost and that the logic of information is dominant. We can say that Donald Trump's posts and the images generated by artificial intelligence are released according to this logic. Even if his messages are dismissed as absurd, which is a matter of opinion, they receive high engagement through their surprising and unexpected content, much like in Shannon's technical model of information. AI-generated images such as 'Pope Trump' or 'Jedi Trump,' as well as a video depicting Gaza as a real estate development site, bearded dancers performing, Elon Musk eating hummus, and Netanyahu and Trump sunbathing, are surprising in every scene (Guardian News, 2025). The interaction value is high. The information order operates through uncertainty. Entropy and uncertainty are instrumentalized, commodified, and weaponized. The information war and the war of internet memes, with their own logic and speed, devour and replace processes that require slowness, such as meaning, truth, and democracy (Han, 2022, pp. 23-24). In the information-driven world, democracy is replaced by "infocracy," and as Byung-Chul Han (2022) puts it, "in an infocracy, information is a weapon" (p. 22).

Trump's ambiguous statements during the Iran-Israel war, his remarks on a possible U.S. attack, such as "I may do it, I may not do it" and "nobody knows what I'm going to do" (WATCH: 'Nobody knows, 2025), clearly demonstrate how (informational) uncertainty⁸ is instrumentalized and weaponized in today's information war. The strategic uncertainty created by this statement is highly conducive to media attention. The threat of uncertainty is constantly kept alive. During live broadcasts discussing the war, the constant display of static images of Tel Aviv and Tehran silhouettes in on-screen boxes is used as a technique that conveys the sense that 'something could happen at any moment,' even if nothing is happening, while also generating familiarity with these recurring images. As the positive value of Shannonian entropy and uncertainty becomes integrated into today's hybrid media system and social relations, it is possible to capture moments of (informational) uncertainty being instrumentalized, weaponized, and commodified, both in Trump's social media posts and in these two examples.

In such an environment dominated by signal, the human beings, turned into sensors and stunned by the speed of hyper-information, naturally experience a loss of meaning. If we listen to Byung-Chul Han again, the slowness of senses and meaning can never keep up with the speed of "hyper-information" and "hyper-communication" (Han, 2015a, pp.8, 13). When communication is reduced to calculability and speed, the slow time of meaning disappears (Han, 2015a, pp. 7-8, 13). Meaning and

⁸ While developing this discussion, we should also keep in mind Clausewitz's concept of "the fog of war," which emphasizes uncertainty. Tuğtan (2022, pp. 280-281), who examines the concept of "mist of hybrid war" based on Clausewitz and Gerasimov, points to "information domain operations" within the scope of political warfare as the main source of this new type of fog. While he notes that the fog of traditional war stems from the inaccuracy or scarcity of information, the mist of hybrid war emerges through the "excess of information" and its manipulation (Tuğtan, 2022, pp. 281, 285). As Tuğtan (2022, p. 270) points out, the mist of hybrid war, like the fog of traditional war in Clausewitz, goes beyond causing uncertainty and damages the connection with reality. Based on this, we can open the door to another study that would bring Shannon and Clausewitz into synthesis: the fog of information created by the high-speed, hyper-information order and the instrumentalization, commodification, and weaponization of uncertainty in the Shannon model pervades not only war conditions but also everyday life. In the society of the spectacle that Debord (1994, p. 30) describes as a "permanent opium war," the fog of the information war we breathe exerts a narcotic effect. Within the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), the fog of information becomes a useful tool, a commodity, and a weapon both in war and everyday life.

knowledge unfolds through duration, whereas incessant, fast and excessive communication becomes drained of meaning (Han, 2021, pp. 76-77). The classic hierarchy of data, information, and knowledge is flattened. In Han's (2021, p.42) words, "*dataism*" and excessive information do not provide us with knowledge and meaning. The information order excludes the past and the future, reducing life to a present devoid of experience, knowledge, and meaning, turning it into mere data exchange (Han, 2021, p.137-138).

Does information truly exclude meaning? Can meaningless information exist? Different perspectives will offer different answers to these questions. If we move from a mathematical view of information that excludes the question of meaning to a theory of information *that is semantic*, i.e., related to meaning, then data and reality must be in accord with each other, and in this context, according to Floridi, false information is *pseudo-information* (Slutskiy, 2024, p.33). To reiterate, according to Floridi's definition, information is *well-formed, meaningful, and truthful data*, and on this basis, in Floridi's semantic approach, for an expression to be regarded as information, it must satisfy the criterion of truth; in other words, an expression can only transmit information if it is true, while false expressions cannot transmit information (Slutskiy, 2024, p.33). However, according to Slutskiy (2024, p.38), human communication cannot be defined solely in terms of message exchange or truth-falsehood. Instead, in the communication process, people transmit meaning in accordance with their intentions within a social context and toward specific aims; thus, they attempt to influence other minds, and this transmission of meaning does not necessarily have to be accurate; individuals may communicate with the aim of deceiving, manipulating, surprising, or confusing others (Slutskiy, 2024, p.38). In this context, Slutskiy (2024, p.40) defines information as a process in which the sender converts any piece of data into a message and seeks to deliver it to the receiver with the intention of creating a specific influence. Within this framework, the intention to utilize any piece of data framed as a message, irrespective of its meaning, form, or truthfulness, transforms it into information (Slutskiy, 2024, p.40). Here, a conception of communication and information that centers on actions, intentions, instruments, and purposes is at play. Intent⁹, and purposeful action shape information rather than meaning, truth, or falsehood.

If we argue that the logic of the mathematical model, once integrated into social communication, makes the signal superior to meaning, and if we emphasize that it is intentions and purposeful action that constitute information rather than truth and meaning, then the disorder, distortion, falsity, and uncertainty of information are inevitable. Beyond all this, are we searching in the right place for the disorder and dysfunction we discuss in relation to information?

Information and Parasite: The Information Order as a Mind Control Parasite

Thirty years ago, Paul Virilio (1995) pointed to the nature of information that overwhelms the senses and causes a loss of judgment with the statement, "no information exists without dis-information." According to Virilio (2007, p. 48), the methods based on censorship and information scarcity seen in totalitarian regimes have been replaced today by an excessive flow of information pumped at high speed. In this environment, disinformation is produced by a deluge of inconsistent information, and this overload of information obscures the factual truth (Virilio, 2007, p. 48). In the same vein, Guy Debord says something very similar to Paul Virilio in his 16th Thesis of *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*: "Disinformation is actually inherent in all existing information; and indeed, is its main

⁹ It is also worth asking: Can information exist without intent? Can information form without any intention?

characteristic" (Debord, 1990, pp.48-49). Virilio makes a similar point to Byung-Chul Han: Speed eliminates the time of democracy, leaving no time for deep thinking; the regime of speed, the rule of speed, takes the place of democracy (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008, p.71). In the regime of speed described by Virilio, the information bomb explodes. The information bomb propels us into *real-time* interaction (Virilio and Kittler, 2001, p. 98), and according to Virilio, the *interactivity* unleashed by the information bomb inflicts catastrophic damage on life, senses, social relations, and our faculty for recalling the past, in a way comparable to the *radioactivity* released by the explosion of an atomic bomb or a nuclear plant disaster (Virilio and Kittler, 2001, p.99, 105; see also Virilio and Armitage, 2001, p. 168). In extreme acceleration, colors disappear and turn gray (Virilio, 1997, p.59). Colors fly away, objects lose their integrity, and meaning turns gray. Imagine looking into the glass door of a washing machine that is constantly washing and spinning. In this grayness, what is necessary is not sense or meaning, but to function as a sensor. Human communication is stripped of its meaning and reduced to signals. Our cognitive capacity cannot keep up with the speed and intensity of information. Therefore, in the information order, under the dominance of signals and the rule of speed, all kinds of disorders such as disinformation and misinformation, collectively referred to as information *disorder*, are extensions of this information *order*. What we call *disorder* are the elements of the information *order*. The issue is not only inaccuracy but also speed and excess. The information order mutates and replaces forgotten human relations through its appearances of disorder.

According to Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2019), the excess and speed of information cause us to lose our critical abilities. The English word "*disorder*" denotes not only informational disorder but also mental *disorder*. In this case, beyond information, the real disorder is the collapse of people's attention and minds. In the information sphere, which has expanded with communication and information technologies, our critical consciousness is paralyzed as a result of excessive stimulation (Berardi, 2019, p.19). The time and slowness required for deep thought and emotions are fragmented and vanish (Berardi, 2019, p.56). Today, power operates by exerting control over "noise"; it is carried out through "simulation" and "nervous hyper-stimulation" (Berardi, 2019, p.91). According to Berardi, the novelty does not lie in fake news; the real novelty lies in the accelerated pace and heightened intensity of "info-stimulation," that is, stimulation driven by information—whether fabricated or real—along with the vast share of attention that information captures (Berardi, 2019, p. 94).

In this environment, marked by the collapse of attention and the mind, whether we call it a '*disinformation order*' or 'information disorder', what matters is how we can strengthen our immunity, nervous system, and critical faculties in the face of the excess and parasitic nature of information. Therefore, based on all these discussions, we may define our current condition not in terms of order or disorder, but as a state of crisis. Crisis refers to an environment in which information accelerates excessively, intensifies and explodes. In this crisis environment, a system is established in which the technical dimension of information suppresses meaning and becomes dominant, reducing humans to sensors, statistics, and indifferent beings. The information age and society have generated a self-infecting parasite-host condition.

Why parasite? Because in Turkish, *noise* is also referred to as "*parazit*", a French loanword. We refer to the static, crackling, or buzzing sounds that disrupt information transmission in communication devices, such as phones, radios, televisions, or even during everyday conversations, literally as 'to make parasite' (a Turkish colloquial expression), meaning 'to cause interference.' In such a situation, information cannot be transmitted properly. The word "parasite" originates from the meaning of

eating at someone else's table [Ancient Greek *para-* (beside) + *sitos* (food)]. A parasite is another piece of information that eats at the table of information. Excessive information parasitizes itself.

There are many different types of parasitic relationships in nature. However, this study focuses on neuroparasites, as they are more closely related to the topics discussed here. Neuroparasites can be described as disinformation machines that seek to spread their own information. They are even more aptly defined as "mind control" machines (Libersat, Kaiser, and Emanuel, 2018). These organisms manipulate their hosts, take control of their brains, and in fact use them to transmit and multiply themselves as information.

For example, the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite controls the minds of rodents, causing them to approach cats fearlessly, thereby infecting the cats (Libersat et al., 2018). Another parasite, *Dicrocoelium dendriticum*, has an extremely interesting life cycle (Libersat et al., 2018): The eggs produced by these parasites, which mature in the bile ducts of herbivorous animals, are excreted through defecation. Snails nourish themselves with these excrements and ingest the eggs. The eggs hatch inside the snail's body, and the larvae develop. The larvae, covered in the snail's secretions, are expelled in mucous masses. These mucous masses are eaten by ants, and the parasite begins to infest the ant. The parasite takes control of the ant's central nervous system, forcing it to climb to the tip of a blade of grass and wait there. The ant, driven by the parasite, exhibits suicidal behavior and is eventually eaten by a herbivorous animal, thereby allowing the parasite to reach its final host (Libersat et al., 2018). Another parasite takes over a cricket and causes the insect to throw itself into water, thereby gaining access to a wetland, which is a suitable environment for reproduction (Libersat et al., 2018). Based on these examples, we can say that hosts function as instrument, medium, or information that serves as a carrier from the perspective of parasites. This process is the transfer of information specific to the parasite's own species, within its own dimension. In this multi-layered process, neuroparasites attempt to establish their own information order by manipulating their hosts and using what their hosts' bodies afford. The parasitic information order is a multi-dimensional process that creates disorder in a way that enables its own information transfer, in line with the parasite's interests, and establishes a new order. Michel Serres (1982, p. 12) states that there is no such thing as a parasite-free system. In this context, the fundamental question is *whose interests* the information order or disorder serves.

As an example from the human world, NATO's concept of "cognitive warfare" illustrates the functioning of neuroparasites:

In cognitive warfare, the human mind becomes the battlefield. The aim is to change not only what people think, but how they think and act. Waged successfully, it shapes and influences individual and group beliefs and behaviours to favour an aggressor's tactical or strategic objectives. In its extreme form, it has the potential to fracture and fragment an entire society, so that it no longer has the collective will to resist an adversary's intentions. An opponent could conceivably subdue a society without resorting to outright force or coercion. (Cao et al., 2021)

When discussing the ecology of digital environments, we use concepts such as viral, epidemic, and contagion. Cognitive warfare manifests itself not only during times of war but also in our everyday lives in the society of spectacle and in our use of media. As Guy Debord (1994) noted, the spectacle is "a permanent opium war" (p. 30, thesis 44). In mediatized everyday life, internet memes and videos produced by artificial intelligence exhibit a neuroparasitic quality alongside their viral spread. How

does Trump's AI-generated Gaza video work differently from a press conference? Of course, the viral spread of the video distinguishes it from being expressed in an ordinary, scripted press conference. This video is neither true nor false. Rather, beyond the distinction of true and false, it circulates parasitic images that are unexpected, disturbing, obscene, bizarre, and phantasmic. Beyond energy sources and geopolitical issues, the visualisation of Gaza as a real estate zone and Mediterranean riviera allows the images that cling to our opinions on the subject to continue to provoke discussions about themselves. The speed at which the mind is occupied by images prevails over truth and critical thinking, which lack the capacity to go viral, and political processes come to be shaped and driven by viral information (Han, 2022, p.19, 24).

Beyond content, are humans in a neuroparasitic relationship with digital media and infrastructures themselves? Does the presence of unpredictability and uncertainty on social media platforms, combined with information overload, bind us to endless screen scrolling? Do we sometimes find ourselves mindlessly scrolling through screens without seeking any meaning? Going even further, do the filter bubbles we fall into, based on the data we provide to algorithmic systems while acting on our intentions, make us parasites of our own opinions? As Eli Pariser (2011, p.15) puts it, aren't we entering a cycle of "invisible autopropaganda" through "filter bubbles"? In this case, our desires, absorbed through the data we voluntarily provide, are returned to us by algorithmic systems, constantly exposing us to them. Are we not creating an instance of *self-parasitism*, where we infect ourselves and pull ourselves back into our own bubble again and again?

If what makes information 'information' is not its truth or falsehood but the intended effect, what happens when our intentions and decisions are recorded, made calculable, and manipulated? An article published in December 2024 emphasized that we have moved from the *attention economy* to the "*intention economy*" and stated that we have opened the doors to an artificial intelligence system and algorithmic culture that will intervene in our decision-making processes with suggestions and directions before we even make them, using the data we have previously provided (*Coming ai-driven*, 2024). After the commodification of attention, our intentions have also entered a process of commodification. Here, we are talking about the manipulation and sale of desires, intentions, and decisions yet to be made. We are, in other words, talking about the price of intention. Thus, beyond right and wrong, we can begin to discuss both *the data of our intentions* and *the commodification of intention as information*, which is shaped by intentions and actions. In this context, the intention of a citizen in their political decisions or the purchasing intention of a consumer can be manipulated, just as the intention of a journalist to report or withhold a news story can be manipulated, and the decisions of a politician can be shaped. Matchmaking applications can also be considered in this context.

In this context, let us ask again: Are we entering a process of self-parasitism (i.e., parasitizing ourselves) through systems powered by algorithms and artificial intelligence? If intentions are turning into information and our decisions that have not yet been made are being sold, to what extent will this take the "information disorder" debate?

Let us describe the situation we are in as follows: an excessively accelerated and intensified endless flow of information; a collapsed state of attention, mind, and psyche; neuroparasitic image fragments stuck in our minds; our parasitic relationship with media and algorithmic technologies; and even the commodification of our intentions to communicate. In this state of crisis, the information society has

become a self-infecting parasite-host. The information crisis is experienced alongside the cognitive war that rages in everyday life.

Information and Immunity: From Border Defense to Ecological Dialogue

What does immunity mean in this state of crisis? How can we strengthen our immunity amid the information crisis?

Strengthening immunity also means defining the *harmful other*. Immunity is a vital defense system that functions to maintain the health of the organism in the face of the threat of harmful other (Mutsaers, 2016, pp. 43-45). However, this is an early definition from an immunological perspective: Within this definition, immunity is generally described using military metaphors as the organism defending itself against pathogenic invasion like a fortress, building fortifications, with a clear distinction between "self" and "other" (Mutsaers, 2016, pp.43-45). In this framework, the immune system has been defined as a defense mechanism using military and war-related expressions (Esposito, 2023, p.181), such as the "body's police" and gendarmerie (Tauber, 2017, pp.28, 31). Immunity is a metaphor that can appear in the fields of philosophy and political theory. For example, in line with this defensive approach, Peter Sloterdijk also uses the concept of immunity through protective and military metaphors. According to Sloterdijk, in a world full of risks, *protection* takes precedence over *participation* (Sloterdijk, 2004, p.196, as cited in Mutsaers, 2016, p.85). In this context, Sloterdijk, who continues the defensive jargon containing the duality of *self* and *harmful other*, uses expressions such as "body police" and "border security forces" (Sloterdijk, 2009, p.20, as cited in Mutsaers, 2016, p.91).

Those working in the field of immunology later pointed out the limitations of purely protective concepts such as the protection of the body by armed forces and identified the problems of the distinction between self and other. Moving beyond the defensive framework, an ecological approach to immunity was adopted, and the complex interactions between the organism and its environment began to be considered holistically (Mutsaers, 2016, pp.50–52; 55). According to Alfred I. Tauber (2017), immunity does not merely protect the body against harmful others but also enables it to open up to and participate in a community formed through relations with others that can support its well-being (p.107). This understanding marks a shift toward conceiving the organism and the immune system not as merely defensive but as being in an ecological "dialogue" with their environment (Tauber, 2017, pp. xii, 219). Building on this shift, the sharp boundary between the self and the other disappears, and it raises the question of "what is an individual" as an organism: For example, an individual (organism) that interacts with its internal and external environment together with its symbionts (i.e., beneficial alliances) such as intestinal bacteria is understood as a multitude (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber, 2012; Tauber, 2017, p.18).

According to Tauber (2017), *immunity*, as a mediator that detects and translates environmental information in a manner similar to the nervous system, is essentially a form of information processing ability (pp. xii-xiii). With this understanding, the ecological immunity perspective highlights the organism's mutual interaction with its environment, its information processing, and regulatory processes emerging out of this relational context (Tauber, 2017, pp.20-21). Tauber (2017) even suggests that this perspective requires a shift from the idea of a *self* conceived as detached from its environment to an ecological orientation grounded in "*in-forma-tion*" (p.144). Tauber (2017) understands information, in the context of immunity, through its etymological root as a process of giving form (p.143). The immune system is a "cognitive system" that shapes itself in interaction with

the environment, forms its "self" identity, generates information, organises information, gives form to information, and processes information (Tauber, 2017, pp.144-145). At this point, Tauber refers to Shannon and Weaver and states that, contrary to their approach, information must be meaningful in order to be information. Unlike Shannon's approach, which leaves meaning out, Tauber describes information as "the message of meaning" and emphasizes that meaningful information is related to the framework of his own work (Tauber, 2017, p. 145). Based on this, the immune system can be seen as a system that, through its encounter with information as a process, is formed by it and also forms it in return. From our perspective, the importance of the concept of immunity and ecological dialogue is that they offer a critical perspective on a systemic level when approaching the information crisis.

Approaching the Information Crisis from a Systemic Perspective: The Neuroimmunological Turn and Critical Immunity

Referring to the different aspects of the information crisis, one could say that we are now living in a permanent state of information war. Furthermore, it can be argued that we are in a post-immunology era in which we no longer collapse primarily due to infections affecting the immune system but rather through neurological disorders (Han, 2015b, pp.1-2). Perhaps at this point, one might speak of a neuroimmunological turn. Especially in an environment where it is said that we are experiencing "brain rot," this diagnosis becomes even more significant. Today, chronic fatigue, brain fog, and attention deficit are extremely widespread. Recalling our neuroparasites example, *Toxoplasma gondii* would reduce the fear of cats in rodents, attempting to reach its primary target, cats. The parasite brought about this behavioral change by infecting the host's brain and, in doing so, manipulating both the nervous system and the immune system, including the immune response (Yoon, Ham, Gil, & Yang, 2024; Nava et al., 2023; Servick, 2020). In a similar way, within the cognitive war that infiltrates everyday life, we are confronted with neuroimmunological manipulation and breakdown. In this discussion, the term '*neuroimmunological*' refers not only to the interaction between the nervous system and the immune system, but also to an expanded field that includes our cognitive and critical faculties. In this sense, together with neural capacity, our cognitive abilities, capacity to act, and critical thinking constitute our immune system against all forms of manipulation in the midst of the information crisis.

The engineering logic of the information regime that feeds on the speed of excessive information and uncertainty, fractures the very time of critical thinking and turns the human into an organism that is at once hyper-reactive and numbed into inaction. This recalls Herbert Marcuse's (1968) *One-Dimensional Man*:

The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is *immune* against its falsehood. (Marcuse, 1968, p.12, emphases by the author)

Marcuse's statements point to a reversed immunity that gains resistance to truth. This immunity is a supposed exemption from truth and accuracy. It is an illusion. There emerges a condition in which no immune response can be given to falsehood. Moreover, consciousness is collapsing due to rapid and excessive information, beyond being merely false. In the information crisis, this false immunity is accompanied by the damage and collapse of cognitive and critical faculties.

Steven Lukes (2005, p.149) understands the concept of "false consciousness" not as a situation in which only a privileged minority holds an exclusive position in relation to truth while others are kept away from it, but rather as "*the power to mislead*." According to Lukes, this power to mislead manifests itself in various forms, such as the control of information flow and the perpetuation of illusions through "censorship" and "disinformation," the stifling of critical thinking, the presentation of the existing order as fixed and natural, and the inability to discern the origins of desires and beliefs. (Lukes, 2005, p.149). The *power to mislead* operates not only through content manipulation but also through excessive information and the acceleration of its circulation. Marx's notions of "false consciousness", "commodity fetishism," "alienation," along with Lukács' "reification," Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry," and Debord's "spectacle," likewise point to dynamics that can be described as forms of "information disorder" at a systemic level. Commodity fetishism and ideology are processes that naturalize social relations, making them appear as fixed and permanent (Fuchs, 2020b, p.187). These are communication processes that conceal relations of exploitation and domination behind "false appearances", framing them as natural and generating a "one-dimensional picture of the world" (Fuchs, 2020a, pp. 225-226). In this sense, according to Fuchs (2020c, p.250), *fake news* may be more adequately approached as "*false news*," a formulation that resonates with the concept of "false consciousness" in Marxist theory. This is because false consciousness, which adopts a false and manipulated informational form to conceal the actual conditions and dynamics of society, also continues to perform this function through *false news* (Fuchs, 2020c, p.250). All types of categories expressed within the framework of information disorder are, in Fuchs' words, mechanisms that generate and circulate "false knowledge," thereby contributing to the ongoing reproduction of false consciousness (Fuchs, 2023, p. 218). Ultimately, all the examples mentioned here point to inhuman, alienated, and alienating communication processes. All these examples of the power of deception are also implemented through the instrumentalization, commodification, and weaponization of uncertainty in an information regime dominated by engineering logic.

In this context, it is also highly relevant to refer to Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle. Debord systematically comprehends the order of information disorders with the concept of spectacle. Debord (1994) defines the spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (p. 12, thesis 4). It is "a permanent opium war" (Debord, 1994, p.30, thesis 44), the stage at which social life is completely occupied by commodities (p.29, thesis 42). "The spectacle ... erases the dividing line between true and false" (Debord, 1994, p. 153, thesis 219). The spectacle, as "the opposite of dialogue" (p. 17, thesis 18), is the means through which "the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise" (Debord, 1994, p.19, thesis 24). The ruling order Debord refers to could be the modern consumer society, totalitarian regimes, or a combination of both. In this vein, Guy Debord, in his 1988 work *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, particularly addressed the relationship between spectacle and disinformation, noting that disinformation is in the very nature of all information (Debord, 1990, pp.48-49, thesis 16). In relation to this observation, Debord (1990, p.8) uses the concept of "*diffused spectacle*" for the form of spectacle in modern consumer society and the Americanization order, and "*concentrated spectacle*" for its form in dictatorial and totalitarian regimes. He refers to the third and final stage, which is a fusion of the two and a more powerful form, as "*integrated spectacle*" (Debord, 1990, pp.8-9, thesis 4). Debord (1990, p.8) notes that while under the concentrated spectacle, a considerable segment of society could still remain outside its reach, under the diffuse spectacle only a marginal fraction could do so. In the present phase, however, with the rise of the integrated spectacle, such externality has disappeared entirely, as it now penetrates every dimension of social reality (Debord, 1990, p. 9, thesis 4). Debord conceptualizes the society at the stage of the integrated spectacle with five main characteristics: "incessant

technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present" (Debord, 1990, pp.11-12, thesis 5).

Ultimately, we can express the concept of immunity in a *negative* sense as indifference, apathy, and deficiency in the face of truth and veracity, along the conceptual trajectory extending from familiarity to false consciousness, commodity fetishism, alienation, reification, one-dimensionality, and the spectacle. By contrast, from the perspective of critical theory and practice, immunity can be defined as *critical immunity* in the face of the fetishizing, alienating, and naturalizing effects of all kinds of falsehood in the information crisis. In addition, *critical immunity* is not only a struggle against information infections, but also against the cognitive and neural collapse caused by the acceleration of excessive information flow. In this context, criticality should not only mean a mode of defense but also an openness to an ecological dialogue.

Conclusion: Paulo Freire and Emancipatory Dialogue as a Proposal for Critical Immunity in the Information Crisis

With the motto "dare to know" [*sapere aude*], Enlightenment and reason, with reference to Adorno and Horkheimer, have been drawn into a form of *autoimmunity*; in a manner similar to an immune system attacking the body's healthy cells and causing its own destruction, they have reached a stage in which instrumental reason has become dominant. The information crisis is an extreme form of this situation. Here, knowing is suspended, and reason is handed over to the information regime in its purely instrumental form. This autoimmune condition also echoes Boétie's question of voluntary servitude, together with Wilhelm Reich's formulation, which is later reworked by Deleuze and Guattari, of why people desire their own repression, that is, how the masses come to desire fascism. Autoimmunity also surfaces in Bauman's analysis: he argues that, driven by the obsessive desires of its gardening and planning logic, modernity turns against itself, propelling itself into states of breakdown, disaster, and crisis (Bauman, 1991, p.279). The information regime is a totalitarian regime. Late capitalism and the information age have reached a moment of crisis in which accelerated and excessive information has become parasitic and meaning begins to dissolve. As a commodity, information, through its excessive quantity, speed, and uninterrupted flow, operates like a parasite. Under these conditions, any intervention in this crisis requires the *noise* of meaning and the slowness of dialogue. Drawing on the theoretical discussions above, we must rethink the information crisis through an ecological and critical immunity perspective, and consider how to reestablish dialogue with our environment, create communication processes that preserve meaning, reclaim livable rhythms, and act.

Inoculating individuals by exposing them to small doses of malicious techniques and distorted content [*inoculation, pre-bunking*], along with the use of fact-checking mechanisms, are relatively passive and mechanical methods that provide only temporary immunity against false content. In the end, we could completely delegate this task to artificial intelligence, ensuring that it verifies things forever and alerts us with notifications. Yet inoculation and verification mechanisms cannot keep pace with the exploited uncertainty and the speed of excessive information. They remain at the level of content and fail to address the structural dimensions of the information crisis. In such a crisis environment, we need methods that will actively strengthen our *immunity* through solidarity. For this reason, the possibilities of critical practices must be reconsidered in light of Paulo Freire's (2005) problem-posing education model and understanding of emancipatory dialogue.

Freire's (2005) critique of the banking model of education closely aligns with a communication theory in which signals are transmitted from sender to receiver, engineering logic dominates, and meaning is excluded. According to Freire (2005, pp.72-73), in the banking model of education, a set of pre-determined and life-detached information packages are transferred from the teacher, who is positioned as the sole owner of knowledge, to the empty safe deposit boxes of passive students. To extend the metaphor, in this model, courses are turned into investment assets governed by a portfolio management logic. The information packages transferred from teacher to student are returned to the teacher through standardized examinations, converting learning into a measurable yield. In this setting, the student's achievement is reduced to a return rate expressed in grades and credits. According to Freire (2005, pp.73, 75-76), this hierarchical and oppressive system of information transfer prevents students from developing critical consciousness and turns them into passive recipients. This is a kind of monologue (Freire, 2005, pp.65-66). It is a spectacle. Here, communication functions as control. In this sense, Freire views propaganda, management, and manipulation as instruments of the banking model that produce and sustain domination and argues that these methods cannot be used for emancipation (Freire, 2005, p.68, 79).

The banking model is not limited to classrooms; it also determines how institutions operate and how all areas of society are defined. Even well-intentioned practices such as fact-checking and verification can bear traces of this logic. Through verification systems, we can create accuracy indices modelled after credit scoring systems and calculate a supposed rate of truth. Yet verifying or debunking content remains a futile effort in the face of the speed and excess of information. Moreover, even when something is proven false, its effects continue to circulate. Verification mechanisms may indeed serve as a necessary and useful response to false information, but they cannot, on their own, resolve the profound crisis we face in understanding the world, trusting one another, and making sense together. One could even argue that they feed the very order they seek to correct. Within the accelerated flow of excessive information, we could get lost in an endless cycle of verification.

The real task is to transform the current crisis through critical thinking and dialogue and to develop new methods that will restore meaning. At this point, what matters, beyond measuring truth, is the recovery of the forgotten values of our shared humanity. For this, we can turn to Paulo Freire's (2005) problem-posing model and his conception of dialogue: The banking model is anti-dialogue, while the problem-posing educational model is based on dialogue and critical thinking (p.83). The banking model presents the world as fixed, naturalizes the existing order, and makes it mysterious (Freire, 2005, p.83). The banking model alienates people from the world by relying on the transmission of packaged information, suppressing criticism and free thought (Freire, 2005, pp.72-73). The problem-posing model, on the other hand, understands the world and humanity as a process of becoming (Freire, 2005, p.84). It is based on critical thinking that frees us from false patterns that appear natural, collaborative learning, and dialogue (Freire, 2005, p.83). Freire (2005), who considers dialogue as indispensable for critical thinking, states that "without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (pp. 92-93), by which he refers to a form of human communication that is freed from the technical logic of control and information transmission. According to Freire, dialogue as a process is nourished by human values. He names love, humility, faith in humanity, mutual trust, hope, and critical thinking as the indispensable dimensions of dialogue (Freire, 2005, pp.89-92).

Whether we call it information disorder, disinformation order, or the information order or regime, what must be recalled in the midst of information crisis are not the mechanical solutions that continue

to feed the system, but our human values, dialogue, and critical thinking. Isolated within the monologue of the information regime, individuals experience nervous and emotional breakdowns; under the weight of excessive information, speed, and falsity, a form of immunodeficiency emerges. The way out of this crisis lies in reconstituting the time, space, and rhythm of solidarity and dialogue. In the context of the information crisis, the practice of critical immunity is not merely a matter of establishing a line of defense. Rather, it is an effort to reopen ourselves to the world with a critical and relational perspective; to establish a space for dialogue that will contribute to the common good within and outside of ourselves, and to gradually expand this space over time. The concrete program and methods of such an effort, however, remain a task for another work.

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The Problematization of Misinformation: Global Policy Discourses and Dissemination Dynamics **

Abstract

This study examines how information disorder is problematized as a subject of digital policy and evaluates this process primarily within the framework of the policy diffusion literature and, secondarily, within that of poststructuralist discourse analysis. The growing influence of information disorders through digital technologies has turned this phenomenon from a mere technical or ethical issue global political, ideological, and regulatory crisis. The study examines the European Union's policies against disinformation within the framework of diffusion dynamics and normative effects; these policies are discussed in the context of their diffusion to authoritarian regimes, using Turkey as an example. The literature on policy diffusion emphasizes processes such as learning, imitation, strategic adaptation, or coercion in the transfer of norms to other contexts. Particularly in authoritarian regimes, these processes can be shaped according to regime interests, turning into authoritarian learning. Discourse analysis contributes to understanding the process of policy construction and legitimization of this diffusion in local contexts.

Keywords

Disinformation, digital politics, policy diffusion, poststructuralist policy analysis

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Information

Information disorders, as old as human history itself, have been an integral part of power struggles and social conflicts. From ancient times to the modern era, political actors have used information as a strategic tool to shape the public sphere, discredit their rivals, and reinforce their own legitimacy. In the 13th century BC, Ramses II depicted the Battle of Kadesh as an absolute victory on temple walls, despite it ending in a military stalemate and heavy losses; in the Roman Empire, Octavianus (later Augustus) against his greatest rival, Marcus Antonius, portraying him as a morally weak leader susceptible to foreign influences; the blame placed on Jewish communities for the Black Death pandemic that spread across 14th-century Europe, paving the way for mass violence; or the New York Sun newspaper's publication of entirely fictional stories about "life on the moon" as an example of sensational journalism in the 19th century, are just a few of the countless examples that reveal the historical depth of the manipulative power of information (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). These historical cases are striking examples of how false or misleading information is produced and circulated in the service of specific political, social, and economic interests.

However, the most fundamental difference between today and these historical examples is the structural transformation in the information ecosystem brought about by digital technologies and, in particular, social media platforms that emerged with Web 2.0. In the early days of the internet, especially during the Web 1.0 era, a predominantly optimistic and almost utopian view of technology prevailed. Texts such as John Perry Barlow's (1996) "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" sanctified the internet as a space free from state intervention, not subject to geographical limitations, free, and self-regulating. This techno-optimistic paradigm was based on the assumption that information is inherently liberating and democratizing (Bell, 1976; Castells, 2004). During this period, the digital world was largely seen as an area of economic development and individual liberation, largely free from politics (Benkler, 2008), and states adopted a "hands-off" policy for this new medium.

However, since the 2010s, this optimistic narrative has increasingly given way to a more pessimistic and conflictual paradigm. The rise of social media, the explosion of user-generated content, and the exponential increase in the speed of information circulation have fundamentally changed the information ecosystem. Initially thought to have democratizing potential in social movements such as the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013), soon led to the global surveillance programs revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013, the 2016 US presidential election, and the Brexit referendum, which turned the phenomenon of "fake news" into a global crisis. The dark side of the new media order has been exposed in numerous examples, most notably the Cambridge Analytica scandal that erupted in 2018. These developments have proven that digital technologies are not merely neutral communication tools; they can also be used for mass surveillance, psychographic manipulation, social polarization, and political instability (Lyon, 2014; Briant, 2020). The Oxford Dictionary's selection of the term "post-truth" as its word of the year in 2016 is a cultural reflection of this profound epistemic rupture.

At this point, information disorder has evolved from being a technical and/or ethical issue into a global public policy matter. Many international organizations and nation-states, primarily the European Union (EU), have defined disinformation as a serious threat to democracy, public health, national security, and social stability, and have begun to develop comprehensive regulatory measures and strategies in this area. Steps such as the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) are pioneering the spread of a rights-based model for regulating the online information environment as a global norm (Bradford,

2023). However, not only the ways in which these policies are produced, but also their dissemination at the international level and how they are re-functionalized in different political regimes are critical subjects of analysis.

The main objective of this study is to examine how information disorder is constructed at the discursive level as a policy problem and how the global policy norms developed to address this problem are transformed and instrumentalized in different local contexts, particularly in authoritarian regimes. Two main theoretical frameworks will be used to conduct this analysis. The policy diffusion literature provides a solid foundation for understanding how norms for combating disinformation spread internationally (through learning, imitation, competition, or coercion), making it the first framework used in the analysis. This framework will also incorporate the concept of authoritarian learning (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017), which explains how authoritarian regimes adapt democratic norms to their own political interests. Second, Carol Bacchi's (2016) post-structuralist "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach will be used to analyze policy texts and discourses to demonstrate how policy texts and discourses not only offer solutions to objective problems but also define those problems, problematize certain issues at the expense of others within a specific ideological framework. This approach aims to reveal the power relations and legitimization strategies behind the global struggle with information disorders.

Turkey, as an increasingly authoritarian regime (Esen & Gümüüşçü, 2016; Çalışkan, 2018; Akçay, 2020), presents a striking and complex case study in the field of digital policy. In recent years, the discourse of combating disinformation has increasingly become a legitimization tool used by the Turkish government to regulate the digital sphere, control dissenting voices, and limit alternative sources of information. In particular, the Disinformation Law, which came into force in 2022, has raised questions about freedom of expression and media pluralism, despite being presented as inspired by EU norms, and has been criticized for leading to a narrowing of these areas in practice. This situation provides a striking example of how rights-based global norms can take on different meanings in authoritarian regimes.

Early Internet Policies: The Depoliticization of the Digital Sphere and the Age of Techno-Optimism

To understand the intense political and legal struggles that exist today on a global scale to regulate the digital space, it is essential to examine the governance paradigm that prevailed in the early days of this space. This period, spanning the 1990s and early 2000s, was a time when the internet was largely treated as a technical and economic issue outside the area of everyday politics and contention, state intervention was deliberately kept to a minimum, and a deep optimism about technology prevailed. This process of "depoliticization" (Kuo & Marwick, 2021) laid the foundation for the internet to become a global phenomenon, but it also set the stage for today's complex problems.

The intellectual origins of this period can be found in sociological theories such as Daniel Bell's (1976) "Post-Industrial Society" and Manuel Castells' (2004) "Network Society." These approaches argued that the production and circulation of knowledge had replaced the material production of industrial society as the center of a new social structure. According to this narrative, knowledge was, by its very nature, an emancipatory force that dismantled hierarchies and encouraged democratic participation. Technology was seen as the engine of this new society, promising economic efficiency and individual autonomy rather than political conflict. This techno-optimistic perspective resonated widely in the minds of policymakers and shaped the fundamental assumptions about internet governance.

The most concrete and effective reflection of this approach was the "laissez-faire" approach that emerged in the US and quickly became a global norm. In the 1990s, the US government adopted a policy of deliberately avoiding regulations to encourage the development of the internet. The Clinton administration's 1998 "Framework for Global Electronic Commerce" served as the manifesto for this approach. The document explicitly stated that "governments should avoid taking on a regulatory, overly interventionist role" and argued that market forces should shape the digital economy. Underlying this approach was a desire not to stifle the innovation and economic potential of the internet with bureaucratic obstacles. This framework document, which set the path for global internet governance, also presented a management model very different from the national monopoly management that had long dominated the management of pre-internet communication and media technologies.

This 'hands-off' approach to the internet is actually part of a broader political-economic transformation that has been spreading globally since the 1980s. Traditional telecommunications sectors had been tightly controlled for many years by state monopolies known as Post, Telegraph, and Telephone (PTT) administrations. However, with the rise of neoliberal policies, the wave of privatization and deregulation that began particularly in the US and the UK fundamentally shook this established structure (Crandall, 2000). The breakup of state monopolies, the opening of markets to competition, and the redefinition of the role of regulatory agencies allowed telecommunications infrastructure and services to be left to market dynamics. The commercialization and proliferation of the internet during this period of intense liberalization explains why it was subject to a different governance model than previous communication technologies (Mueller, 2010). Policymakers wanted to replicate the gains in efficiency and innovation believed to have been achieved in the telecommunications sector in the newly emerging internet arena. Consequently, the internet was seen as the testing ground for a new, market-oriented paradigm, free from the rigid regulations of the old world.

The legal basis for this policy of avoiding regulation was established by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996. This provision exempted internet platforms and service providers from liability for content created by their users. With this law, digital platforms were exempted from the publisher responsibilities that traditional media outlets such as newspapers and television had. This "safe harbor" provision (Gillespie 2018) provided vital protection, allowing platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to grow without the constant fear of being sued over the billions of pieces of content published on them. Section 230 was designed to promote freedom of expression and foster innovation, and it played a key role in the development of the early internet ecosystem.

In addition to the political and legal framework, one of the texts that best reflects the cultural spirit of the era is undoubtedly John Perry Barlow's 1996 "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace." In this text, Barlow declared the internet to be a new civilization outside the jurisdiction of "weary governments of flesh and steel worlds," one that was not subject to geographical boundaries or national laws but set its own rules. This libertarian and utopian vision popularized the idea that the internet was a space completely free from state control, decentralized, and free. This narrative became a cornerstone of early internet culture and framed state intervention in the digital realm as an illegitimate act.

By the 2000s, this techno-optimistic and market-oriented approach became part of US foreign policy under the banner of "internet freedom." The US State Department launched programs to promote internet access and the use of digital tools to support civil society and dissenting voices in authoritarian regimes. During this period, the role of social media in movements such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004-05) and, in particular, the Arab Spring (2010) reinforced the narrative of "liberation technology" (Rheingold, 2002; Diamond & Plattner, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013). The internet was seen as an inevitable tool for democratization, capable of overthrowing oppressive regimes.

However, this era of optimism would soon give way to deep skepticism and disappointment. The most significant trigger for this rupture was the PRISM global surveillance programs of the US National Security Agency (NSA), revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013. The documents leaked by Snowden revealed that major technology companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, Google, and Apple were secretly and massively sharing user data with state intelligence agencies (Lyon, 2014). The fact that digital technologies, which grew with the promise of "freedom" and "autonomy," had turned into one of the most comprehensive surveillance mechanisms in history became a precursor to a social norm shift regarding privacy and data confidentiality. Morozov (2012), in his book *The Net Delusion*, revealed that internet freedom, contrary to expectations, created an important opportunity for authoritarian tendencies such as surveillance, oppression, and manipulation. Thus, the widely accepted myth that the internet is apolitical and free from state intervention has been debunked (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). This event signals the beginning of a new and much more contentious era in digital politics and opens the door to a paradigm shift in digital technology policies.

The Rupture in Digital Governance Norms: The Beginning of the Battles for Regulation and Control

The end of the roughly twenty-year period dominated by techno-optimism and depoliticized internet governance came not from a single sudden event but from the cumulative impact of a series of disruptive crises. Edward Snowden's revelations in 2013 were the first major event to expose the fragility of this cyber-utopian vision. These revelations fundamentally undermined the narrative of a free and autonomous digital realm, revealing that even the largest tech giants could be part of a state-run mass surveillance program. However, what really triggered a paradigm shift in digital policy was the problematization of misinformation as a "crisis." This process took center stage on the global agenda with two major political developments in 2016: the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States.

During these two events, the phenomenon known as "fake news" began to be perceived not as a marginal internet problem, but as a systemic threat directly affecting democratic processes. Content that went viral on social media platforms, mimicking professional news sources but being entirely fabricated or distorted, clearly demonstrated its potential to manipulate public opinion. This situation became a turning point not only for its political consequences but also for the profound epistemic crisis it created. Concerns grew that we were entering an era where truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, were becoming increasingly intertwined in the digital environment. The most prominent manifestation of this mood was Ralph Keyes' (2004) term "post-truth era," which was later selected as the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016. According to this narrative, the new information environment, shaped largely by digital technologies, corresponded to an era in which objective realities lost their importance in shaping public opinion, emotions came to the fore,

information became disordered, and the information environment itself was defined as a problem, crisis, or threat.

This new perception of threat quickly made its way onto the agendas of international institutions and policymakers. Organizations such as the World Economic Forum, which had previously viewed digitalization largely as an economic opportunity, began to list "the spread of mass digital misinformation" among the most important global risks threatening social stability and democratic institutions in their Global Risk Reports (WEF, 2012; 2017). During this period, a new community of experts and researchers, or in other words, a new "epistemic community" (Haas, 1992; Dunlop, 2013), emerged to understand the problem and develop strategies to combat it, which would influence policy-making. Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan's (2017) pioneering report for the Council of Europe established the conceptual framework in this field. The report offered a more analytical typology, differentiated by potential harm and intent, rather than using an ambiguous term like "fake news": unintentionally shared misinformation, information deliberately produced and disseminated to cause harm (disinformation), and the use of accurate information taken out of context to cause harm (malinformation). This conceptual distinction laid the foundation for a more systematic approach to addressing the problem of information disorder and for policy development efforts.

Another critical event that accelerated the paradigm shift was the Cambridge Analytica scandal that erupted in 2018. This scandal proved that the problem was not just about viral lies but had a much more sophisticated and organized dimension. It was revealed that millions of Facebook users' personal data had been collected without their knowledge by the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica and used to micro-target voters based on their psychographic profiles in order to manipulate their political preferences (Briant, 2020). This incident clearly demonstrated how the business model of social media platforms (data collection and targeted advertising) and their algorithmic systems can be turned into a weapon for direct political manipulation, beyond merely increasing polarization by creating echo chambers and filter bubbles (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Pariser, 2011). Research by scholars such as Philip Howard and Samantha Bradshaw (2019) on "computational propaganda" revealed that such organized manipulation activities are not isolated incidents but are systematically employed by governments and political parties in dozens of countries worldwide.

This series of interrelated crises between 2016 and 2018 has definitively ended the "laissez-faire" approach and techno-optimism characteristic of the early internet era. It is now accepted that the digital sphere can no longer be considered a technology field that is detached from politics and neutral; on the contrary, it has evolved into a central arena for power struggles, security concerns, and ideological conflicts at both the national and international levels. As a result of these developments, states and international organizations have begun to adopt a much more determined stance than in the previous period in terms of interventionist and regulatory policies towards the digital sphere. Thus, a new and more conflictual phase has begun in the field of digital policy, shaped by dialectical tensions between freedom and control.

As a result of these conflict- and control-oriented changes in digital technology policies, information itself has begun to be problematized. In other words, this rupture has not only initiated a general trend of interventionism in the digital sphere; it has also fundamentally shifted the focus of political debates. The issue is no longer just about regulating the economic power or infrastructure of platforms; it has become about managing the information itself, i.e., the content flowing through these platforms.

This online information ecosystem, complicated by social media platforms, and the spread of misinformation (Vosoughi et al., 2018) have become associated with increased polarization, declining trust in institutions, election interference, and threats to democracy and public health (Sunstein, 2017; 2021; Bartlett, 2018; Benkler et al., 2018; Aral, 2020; Bail, 2021; Lehdonvirta, 2022; Wheeler, 2023). Thus, "information disorder" and "misinformation" have been constructed as a new and central policy issue requiring intervention by states and international organizations (Fagan & Sugarman, 2021). This new problem area has also formed the starting point for new policies and norms spreading rapidly on a global scale.

Policy Diffusion and Authoritarian Learning: The Global Journey and Local Transformation of Norms

The paradigm shift in digital governance and the growing trend toward regulatory interventions raise a new question: How do these new policies and norms circulate globally, transcending national borders, and how are they adopted by different political regimes? To understand this complex policy process, the literature on policy diffusion provides a fundamental theoretical framework. Policy diffusion, in its most general definition, is a process whereby policy decisions taken in one administrative unit influence their adoption by other units. This process goes beyond a mere technical or legal transfer; it also involves deep political dynamics (Gilardi and Wasserfallen, 2019). Scholars such as Shipan and Volden (2008) explain this diffusion through various mechanisms, including rational learning (examining successful models), economic or political competition (gaining an advantage over other actors), coercion (pressure from powerful actors), and imitation (adopting popular policies in pursuit of legitimacy or modernity). Blatter et al. (2022) transform these mechanisms into a more systematic typology and address policy diffusion as a paradigm. Marsh and Sharman (2009) emphasize the active role of subjects in policy transfer, shifting the focus of the structure-agency debate toward the agency side and arguing that policy transfer often occurs for strategic reasons.

When it comes to digital governance, one of the most prominent examples of these mechanisms is the phenomenon conceptualized by Anu Bradford (2020) as the "Brussels Effect." This concept roughly emphasizes the global power of the European Union in lawmaking and norm-setting. A law developed by the EU does not remain confined to the EU; it also significantly influences laws and norms emerging in different countries around the world. Using its enormous market power, the EU sets its own internal market standards through comprehensive regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the Digital Services Act (DSA). Global technology companies are forced to comply with these rules in order to maintain their access to the EU market, and this situation leads to EU standards effectively becoming global norms. We can see this clearly in the data protection laws that are rapidly spreading around the world (Hu, 2019). In this way, the EU is exporting its rights-based digital governance model to the world. According to Bradford (2023), the process of regulating the digital space worldwide is a competition between the US market-based model, the Chinese state-based model, and the EU rights-based model.

However, policy diffusion, especially when it occurs between democratic and authoritarian regimes, becomes much more complex than a simple copy-paste process. This is where the concepts of authoritarian learning and authoritarian diffusion come into play (Ambrosio, 2010; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). Research in the field of authoritarian learning focuses primarily on how authoritarian regimes that emerged in the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union learned from each other, how they managed to perpetuate their regimes, and how they created an international group of

authoritarian regimes (Hall, 2023). However, authoritarian regimes do not only maintain their regimes by learning from each other. They can also use norms and policies developed in democratic countries for their own purposes. At this point, rather than directly rejecting democratic and rights-based norms produced by actors such as the EU, they tend to strategically adopt them and transform them in line with their own interests. In this process, discourses that are legitimate in the international arena, such as "combating disinformation," "protecting children," or "ensuring national security," are used. However, the policy practices behind these discourses generally serve authoritarian purposes such as restricting freedom of expression, silencing opponents, suppressing civil society, and increasing mass surveillance. The re-appropriation of global norms in local contexts in this way (Mazower, 2012) demonstrates that policy diffusion is not only a technical process but also one of ideological and political transformation. Therefore, a policy's global journey can fundamentally alter its essence and function in the process.

In this context, combating information disorder has become both a new and highly dynamic field for the policy diffusion literature. It is not only misinformation itself that is spreading, but also the policies, legal regulations, institutional structures, and technological solutions developed to combat misinformation. Policies such as content moderation, platform liability, media literacy campaigns, and the establishment of verification mechanisms are increasingly being adopted by different countries and adapted to their local contexts. Consequently, information disorder presents itself as a policy arena where global norms and policies rapidly spread, transform, and compete.

Policy as Discourse

Avoiding viewing policy diffusion and authoritarian learning processes as merely mechanical or legal transfer operations is critical to understanding the power relations and legitimacy struggles behind these processes. It is important to examine not only how policies spread, but also what problems these policies define and what realities they construct through these definitions. At this point, post-structuralist policy analysis, and particularly Carol Bacchi's (2000; 2009; 2016) "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach offer a powerful analytical framework. According to this approach, the public policy-making process is not merely an impartial process that offers practical solutions to objective problems. On the contrary, policies are texts that themselves produce "problems" discursively, define them from a particular perspective, and thereby legitimize certain forms of intervention while rendering others illegitimate or invisible.

The WPR approach asks the following fundamental question when analyzing policy texts: "What is represented as the 'problem' in this policy?" This question takes the analysis a step further by questioning the underlying assumptions, ideological premises, silences, and effects of this representation of the problem. For example, when the problem of information disorder is represented as a "lack of media literacy," the solution focuses on educating individuals, pushing the structural responsibility of digital platforms or states into the background. If the problem is represented as a "hybrid threat from foreign states" (Gugulashvili, 2023), as it is within the NATO framework, this legitimizes security policies, surveillance, and censorship. When the problem is framed as "platform irresponsibility," the solution becomes strict regulations and transparency obligations for technology companies. Each representation of the problem places different actors in positions of responsibility or victimhood, brings different solutions to the fore, and inevitably reinforces or reproduces certain power relations.

This analytical lens is particularly functional for decoding authoritarian learning processes. Authoritarian regimes borrow globally accepted representations of problems, such as "combating disinformation," and benefit from the legitimacy of this discourse. They repurpose these representations of problems to suit their own goals and use them as a tool to justify practices that restrict freedom of expression and suppress dissent within their own political contexts. Therefore, the WPR approach allows us to see that policy transfer involves not only the transfer of legal texts, but also the transfer of the representations of problems embedded in these texts and the political effects created by these representations. This enables us to understand policy diffusion not as a superficial process of imitation, but as a complex process of discursive construction in which global and local power struggles are intertwined.

EU's Policy of Combating Disinformation

With the transformation of information disorder into a global crisis, one of the most comprehensive and systematic policy development efforts to address this problem has been put forward by the EU. The key feature that distinguishes the EU's approach from other global actors is that it addresses the fight against disinformation within the framework of a rights-based digital policy model, rather than market- or state-centered models, as Bradford (2023) also points out. At the core of this model lies the goal of creating a digital ecosystem that protects and strengthens fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of expression, media pluralism, the right to access information, and democratic participation, rather than viewing the problem solely as a collection of harmful content that must be removed. Therefore, the EU's goal is not to censor, but to ensure that the digital environment becomes more transparent, accountable, and safer for users.

This approach has been solidified through a series of policy documents and institutional structures. First, following the publication of news related to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the European Commission quickly put forward the Action Plan Against Disinformation (2018). Then, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, published by the European Commission in 2018 on a voluntary basis and made more binding in 2022, brought together large digital platforms (very large online platforms), advertisers, and civil society, aiming to increase transparency and prevent malicious actors from gaining financial and political benefits. Subsequently, the European Democracy Action Plan (2020) and the landmark Digital Services Act (DSA, 2022) have enabled the fight against disinformation to be placed within a broader legal framework.

The Principles for Combating Disinformation, which came into force in 2025, defined disinformation as one of the systemic risks to be combated as part of the Digital Services Act. The Digital Services Act imposes important obligations on very large online platforms, such as identifying and assessing systemic risks, such as the spread of disinformation, taking measures to mitigate these risks, and being transparent about the functioning of their algorithmic systems. In addition to these legal measures, the EU has built an institutional framework for analyzing the problem and developing concrete solutions by supporting independent researchers, fact-checking organizations, and civil initiatives through structures such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF).

The EU's multi-layered and comprehensive policy framework is not only valid within the Union's borders but also creates a strong spillover effect. This situation, referred to as the "Brussels Effect" (Bradford, 2020), ensures that EU norms effectively become global standards, as global technology companies are forced to comply with these rules in order to access the EU's massive market. Thus,

the EU exports its disinformation policies and the rights-based values underlying these policies to the world. However, this diffusion process is highly controversial due to the inherent difficulties in regulating disinformation.

As Epstein (2020) also points out, the blurred line between what is harmful and what is legitimate expression makes combating disinformation a difficult area to develop a systematic solution for, as it risks restricting freedom of expression. It is precisely this tension that creates fertile ground for EU norms to undergo transformation as they spread. The discourse and tools of "combating disinformation," developed with democratic concerns in mind, can easily be instrumentalized by authoritarian regimes to bolster their own political legitimacy, label dissenting voices as "spreaders of fake news," and shrink the civic space. Therefore, a policy that begins with rights-based intentions carries the potential to become a repressive control mechanism when transferred to a different political context, stripped of its essence. Moreover, its transformation into an instrument of repression is often masked by democratic and rights-based justifications.

The Diffusion of Disinformation Policies from the EU to Türkiye

The global spread of the European Union's rights-based digital governance model and disinformation countermeasures norms, when reaching an authoritarian political context such as Turkey (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Çalışkan, 2018), evolves into a much more complex process of re-functionalization and transformation than a simple policy transfer. Turkey closely follows global digital policy debates, establishing certain parallels with these debates at the level of discourse, but in practice, it instrumentalizes these norms in line with the incumbent government's own political priorities and power consolidation goals. This process provides a vivid example of the dynamic conceptualized by Hall and Ambrosio (2017) as "authoritarian learning": policy discourses produced with democratic concerns are borrowed, stripped of their essence, and transformed for authoritarian purposes.

At the center of this process are new institutional and legal structures such as the Turkish Grand National Assembly Digital Platforms Commission, established in 2020, the disinformation law passed in 2022, and the Disinformation Combat Center (DMM), affiliated with the Presidency Communication Directorate, which became operational in 2022. The Digital Platforms Commission's founding purpose is defined within a rights-based framework, in line with EU norms. The Commission's official mandate is stated as aiming to prevent internet use that is "contrary to the law, individuals' personal rights, privacy, and other fundamental rights and freedoms" (tbmm.gov.tr, 2020). This official discourse reflects an effort to legitimize the policy-making process in line with international standards, particularly EU norms.

However, when the Commission's discourse is analyzed more deeply using Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What Is the Problem Being Represented?" (WPR) approach, it becomes apparent that a very different and security-oriented problem representation is constructed behind this rights-based facade. In the Commission's meeting minutes, "misinformation" is framed as a multi-layered threat requiring urgent intervention of the state. This dominant problem framing takes shape around several main themes:

- **As a Global Issue:** It has been stated that misinformation is an issue that not only Türkiye, but all countries worldwide are struggling with. Indeed, a member of the Commission stated, "The world is talking about disinformation as much as it is talking about climate change," indicating that disinformation is seen as an issue as important and universal as the climate crisis today. Government representatives have argued that Turkey is acting in line with

European countries and global trends in the fight against disinformation. For example, the commission's president Yayman stated that "our basic reference was the European law and universal legal norms" when the law was being drafted, emphasizing that the regulation was based on universal standards. References in Commission meetings to similar steps taken by Western democracies such as Germany, France, and the UK to combat disinformation are part of a strategy to position Turkey's actions as part of a global trend. This persistent emphasis on the global nature of the issue serves to legitimize policy development on disinformation and intervention in the digital sphere.

- **Threat to National Security and Public Order:** In the Commission's discourse, disinformation is framed as an existential threat to "the country's internal and external security, public order, and general health." Speeches by ruling party MPs frequently emphasize that misinformation is a tool for attacking "state sovereignty and democratic functioning," "hijacking the will of individuals and society," and has the potential to create "social chaos." This securitization discourse removes the issue from the realm of civil and democratic debate, legitimizing and even necessitating state intervention through its harshest punitive and regulatory tools.
- **Moral Panic and the Protection of Social Values:** The problem is not limited to a political or security framework; it is also supported by a discourse of moral panic. Commission Chairman Hüseyin Yayman's statements mention "protecting the family, protecting children, preventing the abuse of women," as well as "red lines" such as "insulting religion, digital fascism, hate crimes" in the context of combating disinformation. This dangerously broadens the definition of "the problem" from concrete harms on which there is social consensus to politically controversial and ambiguous moral areas.
- **Intentional Malice and Citizen Vulnerability:** According to the dominant narrative, disinformation is deliberately spread by malicious actors (trolls, bots, foreign powers, etc.) "solely with the intent of creating anxiety, fear, or panic among the public." On the other side of this representation, a profile of citizens is assumed to be defenseless against such manipulation, easily deceived, and in need of state protection. This paternalistic approach disregards individuals' capacity for critical thinking and media literacy, while positioning the state as the ultimate arbiter and protector of "truth."

The ultimate point at which these problematic representations are transformed into concrete policy is the regulation known to the public as the "Disinformation Law," which adds Article 217/A to the Turkish Penal Code. This law punishes "publicly disseminating information contrary to the truth with the intent of causing anxiety, fear, or panic among the public" with imprisonment. As criticized by international organizations such as the Venice Commission and Amnesty International (2022), the vagueness of key concepts in the law, such as "false information," "capable of disrupting public peace," and "intent to cause panic," leaves ample room for arbitrary application. This legal uncertainty creates the risk that the law's main effect will be a deterrent impact and foster an environment for self-censorship among journalists, activists, academics, and ordinary citizens, rather than convictions.

Although a comprehensive institutional analysis has not been conducted here, the Turkish example provides noteworthy clues about how the discourse on combating disinformation is constructed and what social, political, and ideological assumptions underpin this discourse. In this context, questions such as how disinformation is defined by which actors, how this definition is shaped around which value judgments and security concerns, and how alternative representations are excluded can form

the basis for advanced analysis. These questions can be explored in greater depth in future, more comprehensive studies and can shed light on policy transfer, diffusion, and learning processes between different units (countries and/or institutions).

Conclusion

This ongoing study examines how the phenomenon known as "information disorder" in the digital age has been constructed as a global policy issue and how the policy norms developed to address this issue, particularly the EU's rights-based model, have spread globally to different local contexts. The historical process from the early days of the internet's depoliticized "laissez-faire" approach to today's intense regulation and control struggles has been traced, revealing the fundamental dynamics of the paradigm shift that occurred during this process. The case of Turkey provides a fertile ground for examining how global digital governance norms take on different meanings in a local political context and how they are reshaped within the framework of specific political priorities. In this context, questions such as how norms are adopted through "authoritarian learning" mechanisms and how they are reframed through security-oriented discourse can serve as a starting point for more comprehensive and in-depth analyses.

The study paves the way for several important theoretical and practical discussions. First, the Turkish example is a good illustration of how the concept of "disinformation" can become a powerful "empty signifier." This concept, which has gained legitimacy at the global level and evokes a sense of urgency, can be filled with different meanings by different political actors in line with their own ideological and political goals. At this point, politics is not only a problem-solving mechanism but also, as Bacchi (2009) emphasizes, a discursive arena that constructs reality and defines what is a "problem" and what is a "solution." Constructing disinformation as a "national security threat" removes it from being a technical issue and transforms it into a tool that legitimizes the state's use of extraordinary powers.

Second, this case study provides an example that challenges the assumption that policy diffusion occurs only between equivalent units sharing similar characteristics. In this respect, it makes an important contribution to the literature on policy diffusion by demonstrating diffusion from a democratic unit to an authoritarian unit. While models such as the "Brussels Effect" present an optimistic picture of the global spread of democratic norms and rights-based regulations, the Turkish example reveals the dark side, or at least the complexity, of diffusion. Norms and policies do not remain unchanged as they migrate from one context to another; they are transformed, reinterpreted, and instrumentalized by local power relations, political culture, and institutional structures. This situation highlights the inadequacy of approaches that view policy transfer as a simple process of imitation or learning, emphasizing the political and contentious nature of the process.

Finally, this study presents a combination of two different theoretical traditions for policy analysis. The policy diffusion literature focuses on the questions of "why" and "how" (why and through which mechanisms do norms spread?), while post-structuralist discourse analysis helps us understand the "meaning" and "impact" dimensions of the process (what do the disseminated policies mean, what problems do they construct and how, and what kind of political effects do they create?). Using these two lenses together allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationships authoritarian regimes establish with global norms. In this context, questions such as how authoritarian regimes adopt global norms and the accompanying representations of problems, how they reframe them in their local contexts, and what types of strategic adaptations they implement in this process come to the fore.

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Information Disorder, Misinformation, and the Devaluation of Truth in Turkish and International Literature: A Bibliometric Comparison

Abstract

In the digital age, easier access to information has brought with it more complex and effective discussions of concepts such as information disorder, misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth. This study aims to examine how these concepts are addressed in Turkish and international academic literature in a comparative manner. In the study, structured using bibliometric analysis methods, publications obtained from the Scopus database were analyzed using VOSviewer software. The analyses focus on indicators such as keyword co-occurrence, thematic clustering, temporal change, and conceptual density. The findings reveal that, despite the existence of common conceptual cores in both literatures, there are distinct differences in terms of thematic diversity, methodological approach, and technological focus. By mapping the information disorder literature in a visual and comparative manner, the study aims to provide thematic and methodological contributions that can guide future research.

Keywords

Information disorder, misinformation, disinformation, post-truth, bibliometric analysis

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1. Introduction

Academic discussions on the production, circulation, and consumption of information have undergone a qualitative transformation with digitalization. In this environment where accurate, false, and intentionally misleading information are intertwined, the concept of information disorder has become a critical area of examination at both theoretical and practical levels. Although accessing information has become easier in the digital environment, what people believe has often become more influential than facts. Emotions, personal beliefs, and group affiliations directly influence how we evaluate information. In this context, concepts such as misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth have been at the center of interdisciplinary academic interest in recent years, forming the basis for various research questions in different contexts. This study aims to reveal how this growing academic interest is structured at the thematic and methodological levels.

The concept of information disorder is based on the 2017 report titled "Information Disorder: An Interdisciplinary Framework" prepared by First Draft for the Council of Europe. Within this framework, information disorder is defined as an umbrella term encompassing three fundamental types of misinformation: misinformation (unintentionally spreading false information), disinformation (intentionally spreading false information), and malinformation (intentionally sharing accurate information out of context to cause harm). Disinformation refers to the deliberate sharing of information known to be false, while misinformation is when a person spreads information without realizing it is false. Malinformation, on the other hand, is the presentation of accurate information that has been distorted or taken out of context with the intent to cause harm (RDM EDU, 2021).

Although the idealistic rhetoric of the digital age promises an environment where individuals can access information quickly, freely, and without limits, today this expectation has given way to the contamination of the information ecosystem and social divisions. In this context, information disorder is too complex a phenomenon to be defined simply as "fake news." Indeed, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p. 16) describe this situation as follows: "The term 'fake news' is insufficient to explain this situation. Most of this content is not actually fake; it is often created by taking real information out of context, and people tend to more easily believe, and share lies that contain some element of truth." According to Wardle, one of the biggest problems with the term "fake news" is that it is used as a weapon, particularly by politicians, to attack professional journalists. Therefore, information disorder must be addressed within a broader framework. The report defines disinformation (intentionally false information), misinformation (information spread without awareness that it is false), and malinformation (accurate information presented out of context with the intent to cause harm) as the fundamental types of information disorder. Furthermore, attention is drawn to concepts that affect information production and circulation in the context of digital media, such as algorithms, artificial intelligence, botnets, deepfakes, fact-checking, trolling, and VPNs (Özgür, 2023).

In this context, it is seen that information disorder is deepened not only by content types or digital tools, but also by political discourse forms and anti-media attitudes. Doğruluk Payı's comparative study titled "Misinformation and Politics: What Do the Data from 26 Countries Say?" revealed that the problem of misinformation is not limited to populist political movements; on the contrary, it is linked to the general political orientation of parties. The study identified the anti-media attitudes of right-wing populist parties as a significant factor in the circulation of misinformation; it also noted that most misinformation is not entirely fabricated but contains true information that has been distorted or taken out of context. These findings show that information disorder is a more complex and structural problem that goes beyond the definition of "fake news" (Kunt, 2025).

In addition to this structural dimension, how and at what speed misinformation spreads in digital environments is also critically important for understanding the dynamics of the issue. Research has shown that misinformation spreads much faster than accurate information on social media. According to a study conducted by MIT using Twitter data, false content is shared 70% more and reaches the same number of users six times faster. This situation is associated with emotional and surprising content receiving more attention; it is emphasized that individuals tend to share information without verifying its accuracy during times of crisis. Thus, the spread of misinformation is shaped not only by content-based factors but also by psychosocial factors (Çetiner, 2022).

It is seen that not only individual behaviors but also the structural preferences of digital platforms are effective behind this speed. The "Misinformation Amplification Tracking Dashboard" study developed by the Integrity Institute empirically reveals how social media platforms prioritize misinformation. The research shows that false content receives significantly more engagement than accurate content, particularly on platforms like Twitter and TikTok, and that algorithmic systems promote such content. This reveals that social media designs encourage the spread of misinformation not only through user preferences but also through the platform's structural dynamics (Allen, 2022). The concrete effects of such algorithmic preferences can also be traced through certain past events. One notable example illustrating how misinformation spreads rapidly and widely across digital media occurred during the 2016 US elections. An unverified social media post based on a simple user's observations was shared by thousands of people in a short time and resonated nationally through Reddit, Facebook, and blog sites. During this process, the delay in traditional verification mechanisms caused misinformation to quickly turn into conspiracy theories and influence political discourse. The Tucker case highlights the impact of individual content production on mass perception and the potential of social media platforms to become carriers of disinformation (Teyit.org, 2016). This example shows that misinformation is shaped not only by the speed and dissemination capacity of digital environments but also by individuals' approaches to information and the social context.

The issue of misinformation should be addressed not only through the technical structures of digital platforms but also by considering social, cultural, and relational contexts. As Suncem Koçer (2022) emphasizes, while information disorder is a global problem, preventive strategies developed without considering local semantics and the daily practices of media users are often inadequate. Qualitative research conducted specifically in Turkey shows that users' ways of evaluating information are based not only on content characteristics but also on factors such as the social proximity of the source, political cues, and platform indicators. These findings highlight the importance of understanding individuals' place within the media ecosystem in combating misinformation and necessitate the development of user-based strategies.

Another important factor that fuels information disorder is algorithmic filters and echo chambers, which expose individuals only to content that reinforces their own views. Pariser's (2011) concept of the "filter bubble" argues that the way digital platforms deliver personalized content isolates individuals from different sources of information. This structure facilitates the circulation and acceptance of misinformation by causing individuals to encounter only content that supports their own worldview.

Information disorder is not limited to the way social media directs the flow of information; especially in extraordinary times such as health crises, individuals' sense of trust, their practices of accessing information, and their relationship with authority also shape this process. According to Arıcan and Badur (2022), in moments of collective uncertainty such as pandemics, people need not only

information but also a sense of reliability. At this point, digital platforms enable the rapid spread of content that contradicts scientific knowledge, while information disorder in the health field directly affects individuals' risk perception and behavior. The authors emphasize that inconsistencies in the discourse of medical authorities, in particular, facilitate the spread of disinformation, and that individual information filters and algorithmic filter bubbles work together to increase the circulation of misinformation.

The concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers indicate that digital platforms limit individuals to content that supports only their own views. However, some studies suggest that the impact of these concepts may be exaggerated. It is noted that social media users are exposed to various sources of information even if they are not interested in them, and that search engines can increase political diversity. Furthermore, it is stated that when individuals are exposed to opposing views, they harden their opinions even more, meaning that polarization is reinforced not only by isolation but also by intense conflict. This situation reveals that social media fuels polarization not only by bringing together groups with similar views but also through the clash of opposing ideas (Foundation Descartes, 2024).

Marwick and Lewis (2017) emphasize that the phenomenon of information disorder is not merely a technical problem but also a phenomenon shaped by social identities and emotional contexts. Individuals' motivation to share misinformation is often based on factors such as a sense of belonging, validation of political views, or group cohesion, rather than a search for truth.

These developments are also related to the concept of "post-truth." Post-truth describes a period in which reality is perceived based on individuals' personal beliefs and emotions rather than objective and shared truths. The concept gained popularity when it was selected as the "word of the year" by the Oxford Dictionary in 2016 (Parlar Dal & Erdoğan, Handbook on Combating Disinformation). The concept has moved beyond being a technical term and entered mainstream discourse, particularly intensifying during pivotal moments such as the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections. The phrase "post-truth politics" signifies an era in politics where facts are pushed to the background, and emotions and opinions become decisive. In this context, the prefix "post" does not refer to the aftermath of an event, but rather to a situation where truth is no longer valued. The term was first used in 1992 by Steve Tesich and gained wider acceptance with Ralph Keyes' book *The Post-Truth Era* (Jouno, 2016).

The fact that post-truth has become a common usage not only in political discourse but also in the media agenda has caused the concept to evolve from a technical term into a framework that transforms the perception of social reality. Especially with events such as Brexit and the US elections, its use by media outlets without requiring explanation has made post-truth part of public discourse.

Post-truth is not only a concept of a crisis of information, but also a philosophical and political concept that points to the weakening of the binding force of truth within society. Although it is usually translated into Turkish as "hakikat sonrası" (post-truth) or "hakikat ötesi" (beyond truth), these equivalents may fall short of fully reflecting the layers of meaning contained in the concept. In this context, Yalın Alpay's (2020) suggested translation, "the trivialization of truth," more clearly reveals the essence of the post-truth phenomenon. This concept refers to an era in which individuals evaluate the world based on their personal beliefs and emotional approaches rather than objective facts. In this process, where conviction replaces knowledge and belief replaces accuracy, algorithm-driven digital platforms deepen this trend by exposing individuals only to content that reinforces their own views.

This study aims to analyze, in a comparative manner, how academic publications on the concepts of information disorder, misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth are structured in Turkish and international literature. The main research question is formulated as follows: *"How do concepts related to information disorder show similarities and differences in Turkey and international academic literature in terms of thematic, conceptual, and methodological aspects?"*

This comparative analysis is based on the nature of information disorder studies, which are rapidly developing globally but shaped by local dynamics. Turkey's political, social, and digital media ecosystem exhibits unique patterns that do not conform to generalizations in the international literature. Therefore, identifying both common thematic focuses and divergent structural differences makes gaps in the literature more visible. Furthermore, the constant evolution of the field—particularly with the transformation of artificial intelligence, algorithms, and platform policies—makes analyses that document the current state, identify trends, and pinpoint shortcomings even more important. Examining Turkey and the international literature together using bibliometric methods establishes the relationship between the national context and global trends while also revealing areas of unique contribution.

To answer the research question, the study examines publications obtained from the Scopus database using bibliometric analysis methods; it reveals trends in the literature visually and comparatively through keyword co-occurrence, temporal change, thematic clustering, and density maps. Consequently, information disorder is not only a problem related to the accuracy of content; it also concerns what people believe and why. Individuals often evaluate information not based on its accuracy but according to their emotions, values, and the communities they feel they belong to. Therefore, combating misinformation requires not only technical solutions but also social and cultural approaches.

The concept of information disorder has been the subject of rapidly growing academic interest in recent years, particularly in the contexts of digital media, political communication, and health communication. Although there are various bibliometric studies in the literature focusing on sub-concepts such as misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth, the number of systematic analyses that address these concepts together and examine Turkish and international literature in a comparative manner is quite limited. Furthermore, existing studies mostly focus on either a specific concept (e.g., only misinformation) or a single context (e.g., only the COVID-19 period). In this context, this study, which analyzes both Turkish and international literature using the same method and presents comparative multi-layered bibliometric visualizations such as thematic clustering, temporal change, and conceptual density, makes a unique contribution to the field of information disorder.

In the following sections, the methodological framework of the study is presented in detail; bibliometric analysis results are evaluated in terms of thematic clustering, temporal change, and conceptual density. In the final section, based on the findings, the Turkish and international literature are analyzed comparatively, and the commonalities and divergent thematic structures of both literatures are discussed; future research gaps and recommendations in information disorder studies are presented.

2. Method

2.1. Methodological Approach: Bibliometric Analysis

The primary method used in this study is bibliometric analysis, a type of scientific mapping technique that analyzes scientific publications through quantitative data. Bibliometric analysis aims to visualize

the relationships between concepts, themes, authors, and publication trends in the literature and, in this way, reveal structural patterns in knowledge production. Unlike traditional literature reviews, bibliometric methods allow working with large data sets and are used to map the thematic, conceptual, and methodological dimensions of academic production (Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee, Pandey, & Lim, 2021). The main reason for choosing this method is its capacity to analyze literature in a multi-layered and rapidly growing field such as knowledge disorder in an objective, systematic, and comparative manner. Furthermore, the visual presentation of inter-conceptual relationships makes clusters and densities in the literature more understandable and allows for the evaluation of how thematic trends have evolved over time.

2.2. Data Collection Process

The data set for this study was obtained from the Scopus database, which contains interdisciplinary academic publications with a focus on the social sciences. During the search process, the keywords "misinformation," "disinformation," "fake news," "post-truth," and "information disorder"—core concepts in discussions of information disorder—were used. The search query was limited to the title, abstract, and keyword fields; only articles, reviews, and conference papers were included.

Initially, the search in Scopus yielded over 14,000 records related to these concepts associated with information disorder. However, this dataset was narrowed down to enable a manageable and thematically focused analysis; only publications containing the above-mentioned keywords were included in the sample. This created a dataset with high conceptual density and suitable for comparative analysis.

In terms of publication type, most documents in the analysis are peer-reviewed journal articles (12,190). These are followed by conference papers (1,946) and a limited number of book series (136). Of the 57 publications in the Turkish dataset, 55 are in English and only 2 are in Turkish. The numerically limited Turkish publications were not excluded; they were retained in the analysis to ensure comprehensive data representation. English was chosen as the language filter. The subject areas were limited to include disciplines related to information disorder, such as social sciences, communication, psychology, political science, business, decision sciences, and multidisciplinary studies. The publication year range was set as 2010–2024. To separate Turkey-based publications, the "Country/Territory: Turkey" option was selected as a filter; publications outside Turkey were structured as a separate file. The Turkey dataset includes both Turkish and English articles. This process resulted in the creation of two separate bibliometric analysis datasets: (1) Turkish literature, (2) International literature. A total of 6,176 international and 57 Turkey-based publications were identified. The data was exported in CSV format; it was checked and cleaned in terms of title, abstract, keywords, and author information to make it ready for analysis.

2.3. Analysis Process and Tools

The collected data was analyzed using VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20). VOSviewer is a widely used tool for visualizing common keyword usage between publications, identifying conceptual clusters, and creating a structural map of scientific literature. The software allows users to create co-occurrence networks between concepts and perform analyses such as density and time-based changes (overlay) on these networks (van Eck & Waltman, 2009).

In this study, fields such as title, abstract, and keywords were reviewed before the obtained CSV files were loaded into VOSviewer; redundant or missing information was filtered out, and the dataset was

prepared for analysis. Only the "author keywords" field was used in the analysis process, and terms that appeared at least twice were considered. This filtering ensured that concepts with meaningful representation in the literature emerged.

As part of the analyses, keyword co-occurrence maps were created, and conceptual groups were defined using thematic clustering methods. In addition, the seasonal development of research trends was examined using time-based overlay visualization techniques, and concepts prominent in the literature were visually identified through density visualization.

2.4. Separation of Turkish and International Data

The fundamental analysis strategy of this study is based on a comparative examination of the literature on information disorder concepts at the national and international levels. Therefore, two separate data sets were structured during the data collection process. The first dataset was created using the "Country/Territory: Turkey" filter in Scopus to include only Turkey-based publications. This set includes both Turkish and English publications. The second dataset covers international publications from all countries outside Turkey.

Both datasets underwent the same methodological process: they were analyzed using the same keywords, the same filtering criteria, the same analysis tools (VOSviewer), and similar threshold values. This ensured both methodological consistency and made the results suitable for comparison. The main purpose of conducting separate analyses is to reveal the extent to which the conceptual and thematic orientations of Turkey-centered academic production coincide with or differ from trends in the international literature. This strategy allows for a comparative analysis not only of differences in density or frequency, but also of thematic clusters, conceptual affinities, and structural divisions in knowledge production.

3. Findings

3.1. Analysis of Turkish Literature

This section presents the results of a bibliometric analysis conducted on a dataset created for the literature on information disorder centered on Turkey. Four main outputs were produced as part of the analysis:

- (1) a keyword co-occurrence map,
- (2) the evolution of thematic clusters over time (overlay),
- (3) a density map,
- (4) tabular representation of thematic clusters.

Each visual was evaluated separately to reveal the conceptual structure, thematic focus, and temporal development of academic production in Turkey.

3.1.1. Keyword Network Map (Figure 1)

Figure 1 below shows the relationship between keywords that are commonly used in at least two different studies in Turkey-based academic publications. In this co-occurrence map, created using VOSviewer, keywords are divided into thematic clusters, which are represented by different colors. Each color indicates a specific conceptual concentration and a thematic focus that stands out in the literature.

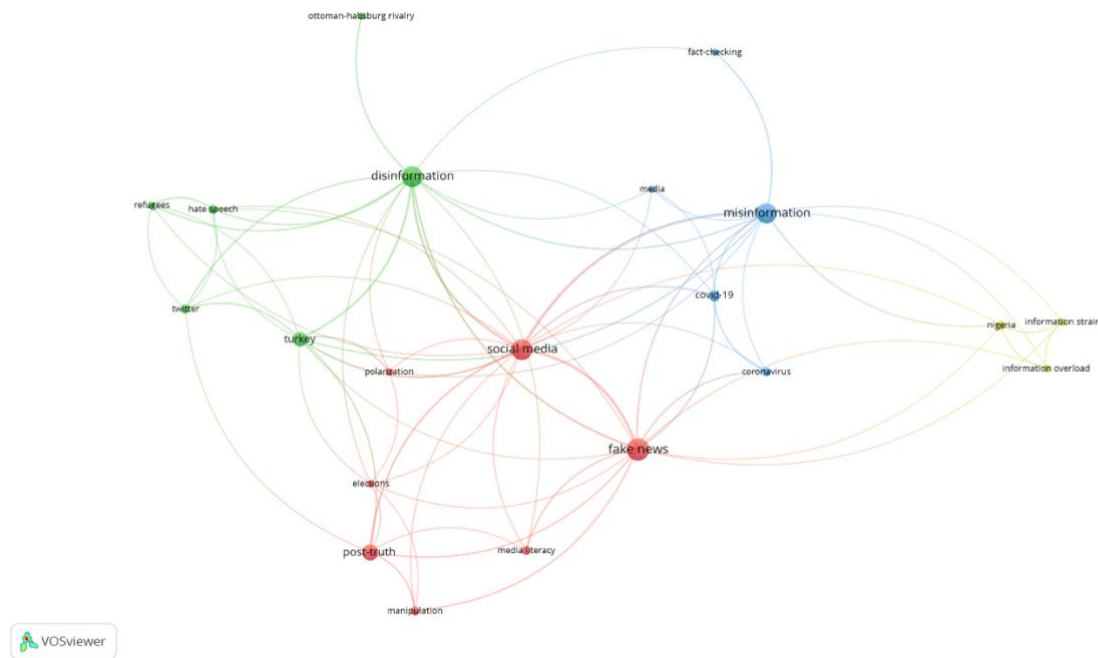


Figure 1. Co-occurrence map of keywords in Turkey-based academic publications (created with VOSviewer)

The map is divided into four main clusters:

1. The red cluster is shaped around concepts such as "post-truth," "fake news," "media literacy," and "elections," focusing on themes of information manipulation and disinformation in political processes.
2. The blue cluster represents the spread of misinformation in the context of health communication, with concepts such as "covid-19," "misinformation," and "fact-checking."
3. The green cluster is related to social polarization, hate speech, and social media discourse through concepts such as "disinformation," "refugees," "hate speech," and "polarization."
4. The yellow cluster reflects issues of cognitive load, perceptual strain, and information overload at the individual level through concepts such as "information overload" and "information strain."

3.1.2. Evolution of Themes Over Time (Overlay – Figure 2)

Figure 2 shows the average distribution of keywords used in Turkey-centered information disorder literature by year. This visualization was created using the "overlay visualization" module of the VOSviewer software. The color scale reflects the average publication year in which each keyword first appeared or appeared most intensely in the literature.

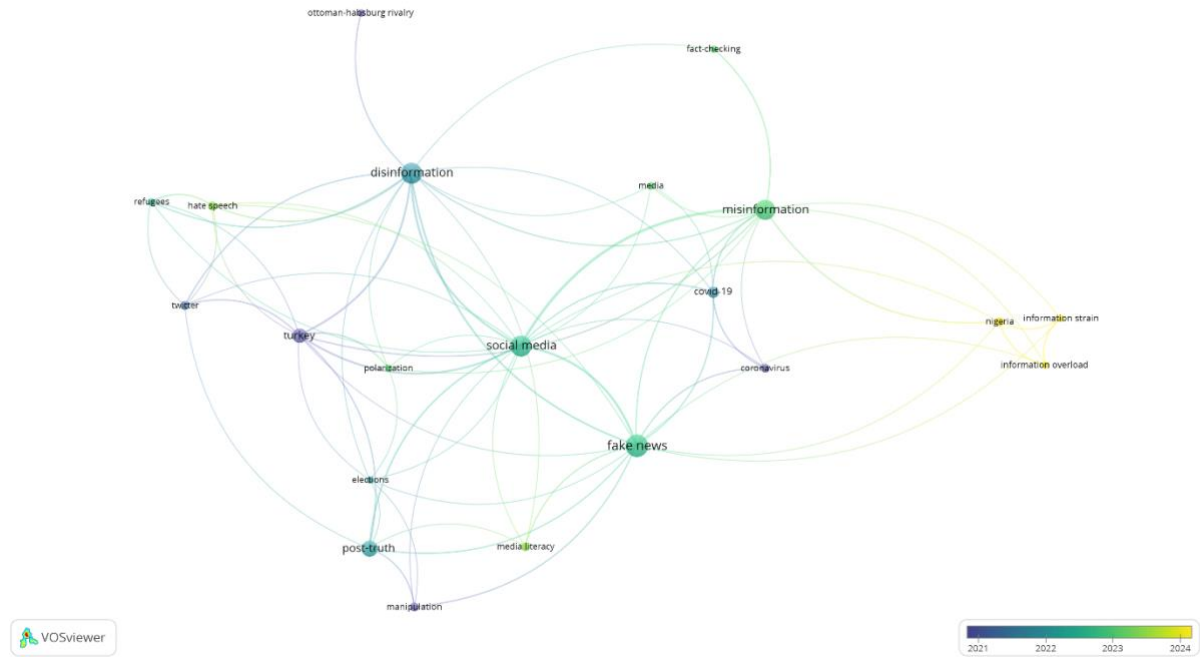


Figure 2. Distribution of keywords over time in Turkey-centered academic publications (created with Overlay Visualization – VOSviewer)

Upon examining the map, it is evident that the development of the information disorder literature in Turkey has diversified thematically over time. While political concepts such as "post-truth," "elections," and "manipulation" came to the fore in the 2020–2021 period, health-themed concepts such as "covid-19" and "misinformation" gained prominence as of 2022. In 2023 and beyond, concepts related to cognitive load, perceptual strain, and individual effects, such as "information overload" and "information strain," have come to the fore.

The color distribution visually supports this trend: Concepts in dark blue tones, such as "post-truth" and "elections," point to older publications, while concepts in light yellow tones, such as "information overload," represent the literature on increasing individual information fatigue in recent years. These findings show that Turkey-centered academic literature has shifted from a political and health-focused structure in line with global developments (e.g., pandemic, elections) to increasingly psychosocial and individual themes.

3.1.3. Density Map (Figure 3)

Figure 3 visualizes the intensity level of key concepts that stand out in Turkey-centered information disorder literature. This map was created using VOSviewer software and produces a heat map based on the frequency of use of each concept in the literature and its strength of connection with other concepts. As the color intensity increases, the central position of the concept in the literature also strengthens.

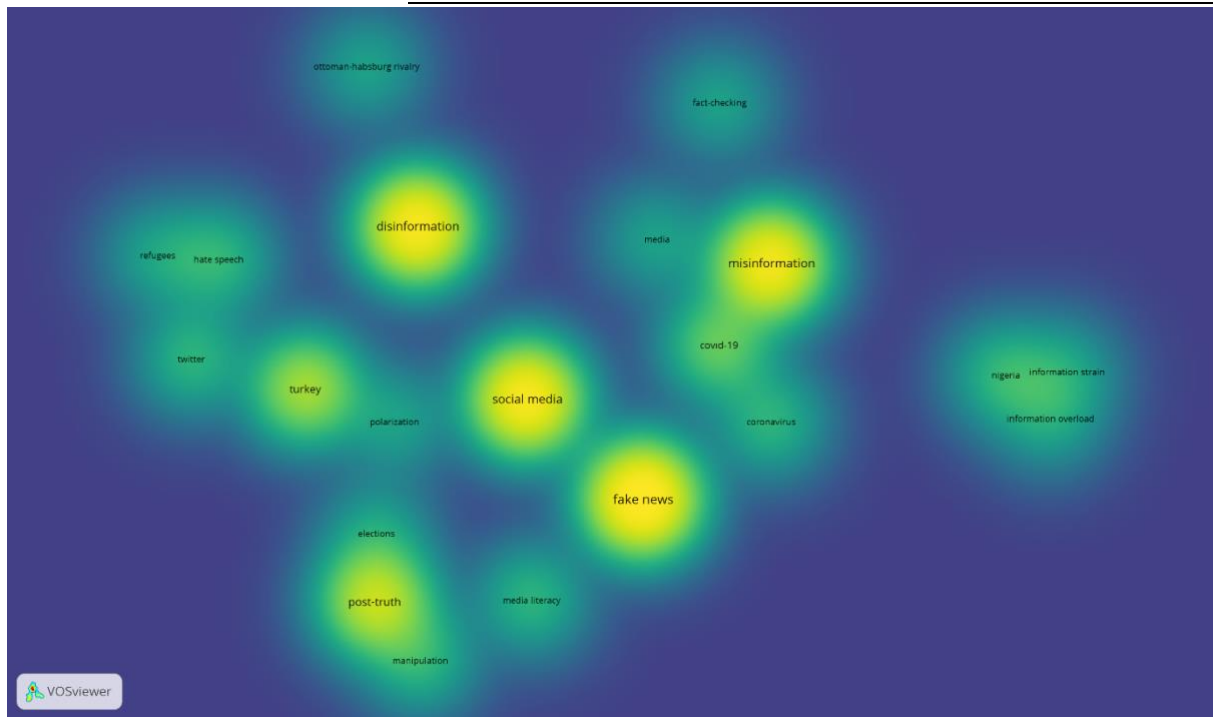


Figure 3. Keyword density map in Turkey-centered academic publications (created with Density Visualization – VOSviewer)

Upon examining the map, it is seen that concepts such as "social media," "fake news," "misinformation," and "disinformation" are positioned as fundamental conceptual cores in the Turkish literature. These concepts are represented in yellow tones on the map due to both their high repetition count and their strong level of connection with other terms. In contrast, concepts such as "information overload," "manipulation," and "Nigeria" are represented in blue-green tones and occupy a more marginal position on the map, indicating that these themes have been addressed in only a limited number of studies in the literature. Overall, the density map reveals that the Turkey-centered information disorder literature has yet to take shape around specific conceptual axes and that some new or secondary themes have gained limited visibility.

3.1.4. Thematic Clustering and Interpretation (Table 1)

In the keyword co-occurrence analysis performed with VOSviewer, a total of 21 concepts that stand out in the Turkey-centered information disorder literature have been divided into four main thematic clusters. Each cluster represents a specific thematic focus based on common concept patterns.

Table 1. Cluster representation of keywords in Turkey-centered literature (*VOSviewer cluster analysis results*)

Cluster	Thematic Title	Key Words
1	Political Manipulation and Social Media	fake news, post-truth, elections, media literacy, polarization, social media, manipulation
2	Social & Political Context – Turkey Focused	disinformation, turkey, twitter, refugees, hate speech, ottoman-habsburg rivalry

3	COVID-19 and Health-Related Information Disorder	Covid-19, coronavirus, misinformation, fact-checking, media
4	Information Overload and Individual Effects	information overload, information strain, Nigeria

The first cluster reflects the dynamics of disinformation in political manipulation and political communication with concepts such as "fake news," "post-truth," and "elections." The second cluster reveals the social and political contexts of themes such as social media, migrant discourse, and hate speech in Turkey-focused publications. The third cluster is shaped around health communication, misinformation, and verification efforts in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. The fourth cluster includes relatively new and marginal themes such as information overload, cognitive strain, and effects at the level of individual perception.

3.1.5. General Assessment of the Turkish Literature

The Turkey-centered information disorder literature is conceptually concentrated around a limited number of core terms; concepts such as "fake news," "misinformation," "disinformation," and "social media" are particularly prominent. Thematically, the literature clusters around four main axes: political manipulation, social polarization, pandemic processes, and individual information overload. Map analyses show that political processes and health themes dominate the literature, while cognitive and individual dimensions have recently emerged as marginal themes. Overall, although the Turkish literature has a limited structure in terms of conceptual diversity and disciplinary breadth, it is undergoing a transformation in content parallel to global developments.

3.2. International Literature Analysis

In this section, the thematic structure of the international academic literature on the phenomenon of information disorder was examined using bibliometric analysis methods. The analysis, based on 6,176 publications obtained from the Scopus database, aims to reveal the concepts that stand out in the literature, the relationship structures between these concepts, and the dynamics of temporal change. Four main visual/data outputs were presented within the scope of the applied analyses:

- (1) a keyword co-occurrence map,
- (2) time-based conceptual evolution (overlay),
- (3) a conceptual density map,
- (4) tabular representation of thematic clusters.

The findings reveal the conceptual diversity and interdisciplinary nature of the international literature.

3.2.1. Keyword Network Map (Figure 4)

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords in publications on the theme of information disorder in the international literature clearly reveals the interdisciplinary nature and thematic diversity of the subject. In the network map shown in Figure 4, the size of the concepts represents their frequency of use in the literature, while the colors represent thematic clustering.

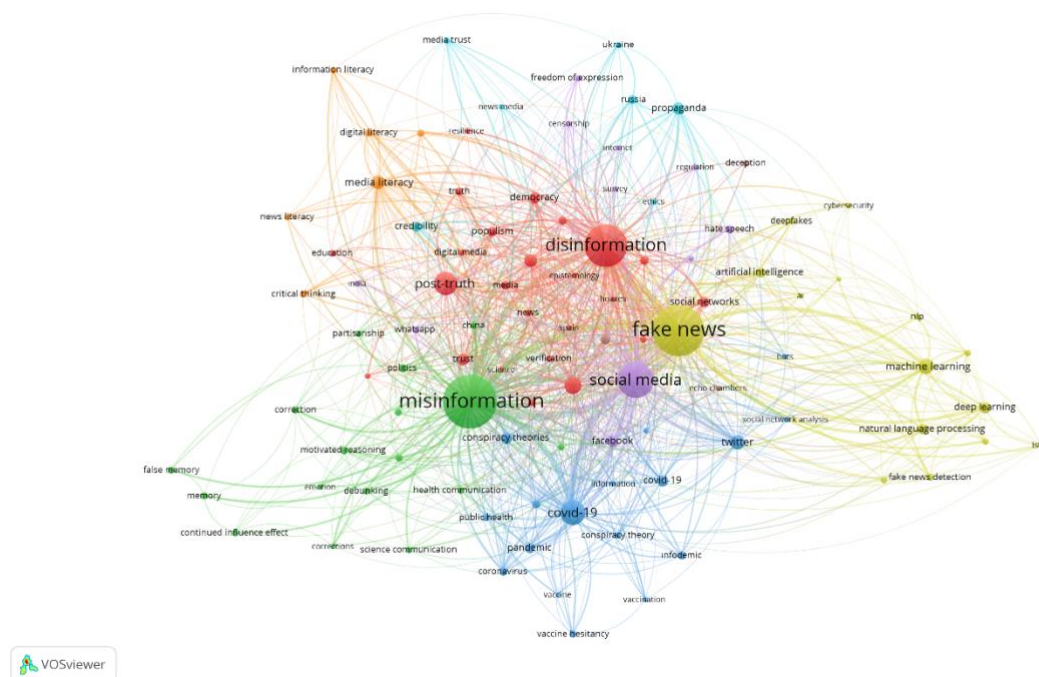


Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence map in publications on information disorder in the international literature (created with VOSviewer)

Concepts such as "disinformation," "fake news," "misinformation," and "social media" occupy a central position in the literature; around them, multi-layered themes such as political disinformation, cognitive processes, health-based information pollution, AI-supported detection systems, and media literacy emerge. This structure demonstrates that the issue of information disorder at the international level is addressed not only at the content production level but also in terms of its individual, social, technological, and pedagogical dimensions.

Thematic Clusters

- **Red Cluster – Political Disinformation and Political Discourse:** This cluster, consisting of concepts such as "disinformation," "post-truth," "propaganda," "democracy," "freedom of expression," and "political communication," covers the production and circulation processes of disinformation in a political context. The intense connection between the concepts demonstrates the high level of interest in the literature regarding the impact of information disorder on democratic systems and media structures.
- **Green Cluster – Individual and Cognitive Processes:** This cluster, shaped around concepts such as "misinformation," "false memory," "emotion," "debunking," and "motivated reasoning," includes studies examining individuals' cognitive and emotional responses to misinformation. These psychology and behavioral science-based publications analyze the impact of misinformation on belief, perception, and decision-making processes.
- **Yellow Cluster – Technological Interventions and Artificial Intelligence Methods:** This cluster, which includes terms such as "machine learning," "deep learning," "natural language processing," "fake news detection," and "bots," covers technical and algorithmic approaches developed to combat information disorder.
- **Blue Cluster – Health Context and Infodemic:** Concepts such as "COVID-19," "infodemic," "vaccine hesitancy," "pandemic," and "public health" represent studies focusing on the information pollution that emerged during the pandemic. This cluster addresses information

disorder, particularly in the context of health behaviors, vaccine hesitancy, and public health policies.

- **Purple Cluster – Social Media Ecosystem and Digital Dissemination:** This cluster, which includes concepts such as "social media," "Facebook," "Twitter," "echo chambers," and "social networks," examines the circulation of information disorder on digital platforms and phenomena such as echo chambers.
- **Orange Cluster – Critical Approaches and Media Literacy:** This cluster, formed by concepts such as "media literacy," "digital literacy," "critical thinking," "education," and "news literacy," represents awareness-raising, pedagogical approaches, especially for young individuals and users.

In the international literature, the phenomenon of information disorder exhibits a high degree of diversity, both conceptually and thematically. The bibliometric analysis conducted reveals that there is intense academic production not only around a few core concepts but also in various fields such as political communication, cognitive psychology, digital media studies, health communication, and AI-supported technical interventions.

Thematic clusters show that information disorder is addressed in a multi-layered manner, on the one hand with political discourse forms such as "disinformation," "post-truth," and "propaganda," and on the other hand with individuals' perceptual processes, social media dynamics, and technology-supported solution proposals. This structure reveals that the international literature has developed within a strong interdisciplinary framework, encompassing both theoretical and practical aspects.

3.2.2. Time-Based Change (Overlay – Figure 5)

The Overlay Map, created to analyze the development of concepts used in publications on the theme of information disorder in the international literature over time, shows the average year each keyword appeared in the literature using a color scale.

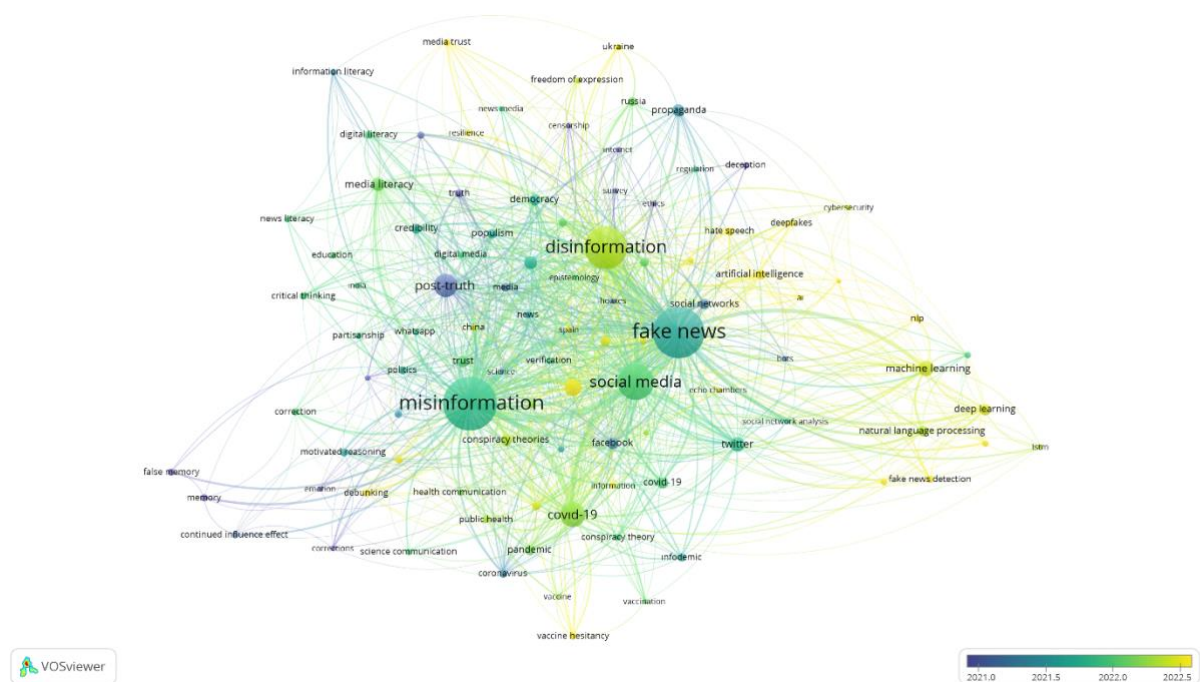


Figure 5. Temporal distribution of keywords related to information disorder in the international literature (created with Overlay Visualization – VOSviewer)

The color distribution indicates three main time periods:

Early Period Themes (2020–2021) – Dark Blue/Purple: Concepts such as "post-truth," "memory," "false memory," "debunking," and "critical thinking" came to the fore during this period. In this phase, the literature discussed information disorder on a theoretical basis, particularly in the context of individual cognitive processes, perception mechanisms, and post-truth discourse.

Mid-Period Themes (2022) – Green / Light Green: Concepts such as "misinformation," "COVID-19," "science communication," "conspiracy theories," and "vaccine" came to the fore during this period. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature has focused on themes of health communication, infodemic, vaccine hesitancy, and distrust of scientific knowledge.

Late Period Themes (2023–2024) – Yellow / Light Yellow: Concepts such as "machine learning," "deep learning," "fake news detection," "natural language processing (NLP)," "bots," "BERT," and "LSTM" have become increasingly visible in the literature in the context of AI-supported interventions and automatic detection systems. These themes indicate an increasing shift towards technical solutions in the fight against information disorder.

Overlay analysis reveals that the information disorder literature has undergone a transformation over time from theoretical approaches to technical intervention methods. While discussions focused on individual perception and political discourse initially prevailed, the context of health communication became dominant in the literature over time due to the impact of the pandemic; in the last two years, AI-based technological solutions have become the focus. This change demonstrates the strengthening of an interdisciplinary approach in information disorder studies and an evolution from theory to practice.

3.2.3. Conceptual Density (Figure 6)

Figure 6, created to visualize the conceptual density in the international information disorder literature, is a density map where keywords are represented by colors according to their frequency of use and the level of connection within the conceptual network. The map was created using the "density visualization" module of the VOSviewer software.

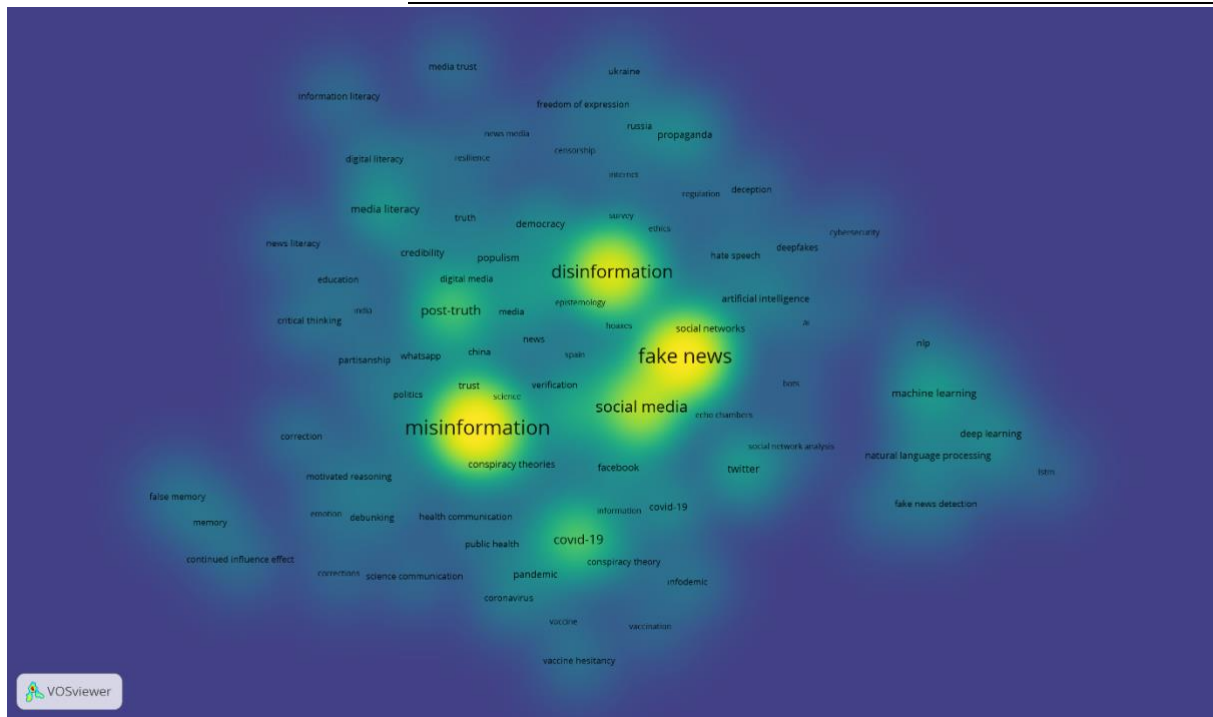


Figure 6. Keyword density map on the theme of information disorder in the international literature (created with VOSviewer)

The color scale in the map reflects both the extent to which concepts are repeated and the strength of their relationships with other concepts in the literature:

- Yellow tones → The most frequently used concepts with the highest level of connectivity
- Green tones → Moderately used concepts
- Blue tones → Low-frequency, marginal, or new concepts

High-Intensity Concepts at the Center (Yellow Zone): The concepts "fake news," "misinformation," "disinformation," and "social media" are located at the center of the intensity map and form the fundamental conceptual axis of the literature. These concepts have both the highest repetition rates and strong conceptual links with other keywords.

Moderately Strong Concepts (Green Zone): Concepts such as "Covid-19," "conspiracy theories," "post-truth," "political communication," "machine learning," and "media literacy" occupy an important place in the literature but focus on more specific thematic areas. These concepts represent sub-channels of the literature that open to the dimensions of health, politics, and technical intervention.

Marginal/New Themes (Blue Zone): Concepts such as "deep learning," "bots," "vaccine hesitancy," "natural language processing (NLP)," "ethics," "infodemic," "memory," and "corrections" have lower repetition rates. These terms point to either emerging research topics or sub-themes specific to certain contexts.

In the international literature, the concepts of "fake news," "misinformation," "disinformation," and "social media" form the core of information disorder studies and have strong links to numerous sub-themes. The themes developing around this core reflect the disciplinary diversity and research focuses in the literature. Technical themes (e.g., machine learning, NLP) and contextual content (e.g.,

vaccine hesitancy, infodemic) are still less intensely represented in the literature and are considered emerging sub-themes. Clustering analysis of the international dataset shows that 100 keywords are grouped into eight thematic clusters. These clusters are shaped around thematic axes such as political communication, individual-cognitive processes, artificial intelligence applications, health communication, and media literacy. This diversity highlights the interdisciplinary nature and thematic depth of the information disorder literature.

3.2.4. Thematic Clusters (Table 2)

According to the clustering analysis conducted in the international literature, 100 keywords related to information disorder have been grouped into eight thematic clusters based on their conceptual proximity. These clusters reveal how the phenomenon of information disorder is addressed in different contexts and disciplines, demonstrating that the literature has a multi-layered structure in political, individual, technological, and pedagogical dimensions.

Table 2. Thematic clustering of keywords related to information disorder in the international literature (based on VOSviewer clustering analysis)

Cluster	Thematic (suggestion)	Title	Keywords (summary)
Cluster 1	Political Communication and Media		disinformation, political communication, democracy, journalism, media, post-truth
Cluster 2	Psychological and Cognitive Approaches		misinformation, emotion, memory, debunking, health communication
Cluster 3	COVID-19 and Public Health		COVID-19, infodemic, vaccine hesitancy, public health, Twitter
Cluster 4	Technological Interventions		machine learning, NLP, deep learning, fake news detection, artificial intelligence
Cluster 5	Digital Platforms		social media, freedom of expression, regulation, hate speech, Facebook, survey
Cluster 6	Political Trust and Propaganda		media trust, credibility, propaganda, Russia, ethics
Cluster 7	Media Literacy and Education		media literacy, digital literacy, critical thinking, news literacy
Cluster 8	Algorithmic Diffusion and Polarization		echo chambers, polarization, deception

The clusters presented in Table 2 show that the international information disorder literature is organized on different levels.

Themes such as political discourse, perception management, democracy, and propaganda are addressed from the perspectives of political science and communication. The themes of health communication and infodemic have gained significant prominence in the literature, particularly during the pandemic. The technological interventions cluster represents solutions developed against misinformation using artificial intelligence-supported systems. Concepts such as media literacy, critical thinking, and digital awareness point to more education-focused approaches, while concepts such as echo chamber, polarization, and deception reveal the social effects of information circulation on digital platforms. This thematic diversity reveals that the literature on information disorder has become richer not only in terms of content but also in terms of methodology and discipline. This internationally developed structure brings together theoretical approaches to information disorder with applied solution strategies.

3.2.5. General Assessment of the International Literature

In the international literature, the phenomenon of information disorder is addressed not only around specific core concepts but also within interdisciplinary and multi-layered thematic contexts. Bibliometric analyses reveal that concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and social media are at the center of the literature; these concepts are linked to a wide range of research areas, from political communication to health crises, media trust, and artificial intelligence-based technical solutions.

According to the overlay analysis, the thematic focus of the literature has undergone a distinct evolution over time: In the early period, theoretical and cognitive themes such as "post-truth" and "memory" were prominent; during the pandemic, concepts such as "covid-19," "infodemic," and "vaccine hesitancy" came to the fore; while in recent years, the focus of the literature has shifted to technical intervention methods such as "machine learning," "NLP," and "fake news detection."

The clustering results clearly reveal this structural diversity through eight thematic groups. These themes, ranging from political discourse to cognitive psychology, health communication to media literacy, demonstrate that the information disorder literature has both content depth and methodological richness.

4. Conclusion and Evaluation

This study has examined how the concept of information disorder is addressed in Turkish and international academic literature through a comparative bibliometric analysis. The analyses reveal that core concepts such as misinformation, fake news, disinformation, and social media occupy a central position in both literatures. However, meaningful differences were observed in terms of thematic scope, disciplinary diversity, and methodological approach.

The Turkish literature addresses information disorder mainly around a limited number of themes such as political manipulation, health communication, social polarization, and cognitive information overload. In contrast, the international literature opens to multi-layered and interdisciplinary areas such as artificial intelligence-based detection systems, natural language processing (NLP), media literacy, and individual psychological processes. Time-based analyses also support this difference; while the international literature shows a transition from theoretical approaches to applied technical solutions, the Turkish literature appears to be more static and conceptual in nature.

Table 3. Thematic Comparison of Turkish and International Literature

Dimension/Theme	Turkish Literature	International Literature
Core Concepts	misinformation, fake news, disinformation, social media	misinformation, disinformation, fake news, social media
Thematic Depth	4 clusters: politics, health, social impacts, cognitive load	8 clusters: politics, health, technology, media literacy, platforms, cognitive processes, etc.
Disciplinary Diversity	Limited: primarily social sciences	High: social sciences, health, computer science
Change Over Time	post-truth → COVID-19	post-truth → COVID-19 → AI/NLP
New Themes	Limited (e.g., media literacy, polarization)	Artificial intelligence, NLP, deep learning, bots, fake news detection
Methodological Focus	Conceptual & descriptive emphasis	Conceptual + technical solution proposals included

Source: Prepared by the author based on Scopus data.

These differences shed light not only on academic orientations but also on the nature of social relationships established through knowledge and the functions assigned to knowledge. The main reason for this study's comparative approach to Turkish and international literature is that the field of information disorder is not only a global issue but also a contextually shaped phenomenon. The functioning of digital media environments, political culture, user behaviors, and platform policies vary from country to country. Therefore, determining how themes dominant in the global literature are received in Turkey and what gaps exist is important both to reveal field-specific needs and to open up original research areas. Furthermore, the issue of information disorder has a constantly evolving structure due to the impact of technological developments such as artificial intelligence, algorithmic steering, and digital control. In this process of transformation, conducting a comprehensive assessment, documenting the current trends in the literature, and identifying research gaps contributes strategically to scientific production. The literature on information disorder in Turkey follows global themes but is still in its early stages in terms of content diversity and methodological innovation.

Furthermore, although there are various bibliometric studies in the literature focusing on concepts such as misinformation, disinformation, and post-truth, systematic studies that address these concepts together and examine the Turkish and international literature comparatively using the same method are quite limited. Existing studies mostly focus on either a single concept (e.g., only misinformation) or a single context (e.g., only the COVID-19 period). In this regard, this study, which evaluates both Turkish and international literature using similar analytical tools and presents multi-

layered bibliometric visualizations such as thematic clustering, temporal change, and conceptual density, provides a unique and comprehensive contribution to the literature.

In conclusion, for future research to enable scientific production in Turkey to become more integrated with the international literature, it is necessary not only to increase the number of publications but also to diversify research topics, increase methodological depth, and develop technical infrastructure. Considering all these recommendations, the path to developing effective strategies to combat information disorder lies not only in restructuring information production processes, but also in producing policies that meet the needs of the new era, such as digital citizenship, ethical media use, and algorithmic transparency.

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Salih Bıçakcı* & Ayhan Gücüyener Evren**

An Analysis of Cognitive Security and Disinformation Attack Chains

*"An unexciting truth may be
eclipsed by a thrilling falsehood."*

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World
Revisited*, 1958

Abstract

Cognitive security encompasses safeguarding individuals' cognitive vulnerabilities and decision-making processes against exploitation and manipulation. Unlike conventional security and cybersecurity, cognitive security recognizes that conflicts extend beyond physical and digital realms to encompass mental dimensions. Disinformation attacks pose a significant threat to cognitive security. While disinformation attacks are not novel, the misuse of digital platforms, algorithmic vulnerabilities, and generative artificial intelligence technologies has accelerated the proliferation and dissemination of disinformation, expanding its scope and endurance. However, the literature on combating disinformation has predominantly focused on individual and isolated applications, such as media literacy and platform policy regulation. Consequently, relatively few approaches scrutinize how disinformation is weaponized or systematically operationalized. This study commences by delineating a framework for cognitive security and the disinformation ecosystem. Subsequently, it describes the disinformation attack chain in seven fundamental stages, analyzing the framework models and approaches from the literature. In summation, this study introduces the phenomenon of disinformation not merely as an instantaneous weapon targeting the information ecosystem but as a systematic framework that employs psychosocial elements to undermine societal trust in information and systems.

Keywords

Cognitive security, disinformation, disinformation attack chain, social resilience, trust

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1. Introduction

The adage “*ipsa scientia potestas est*” (knowledge itself is power), attributed to the English philosopher Francis Bacon, frequently serves as a poignant illustration of the intricate relationship between knowledge creation, utilization, and influence. The advent of the information age, a consequence of the unprecedented advancements in information and communication technologies, has not only revolutionized the tools employed in knowledge production but has also engendered a novel social structure that has profoundly reshaped the perception of knowledge-based reality and the fundamental elements of power. The proliferation of knowledge production and distribution channels through digital media has resulted in an exponential increase in the volume of data we are exposed to on a daily basis, surpassing the levels we encountered in the past. For example, Bohn and Short found in their study of American consumers that the average individual is exposed to an average of 34 GB of data per day (Bohn & Short, 2012). In addition, as Cheney-Lippold points out, with the development of algorithmic processes, individuals have now become data sets, and data belonging to individuals is often assigned categorical meanings without their direct knowledge or consent (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). In other words, digital channels and platforms have increased the volume of data and accelerated its production and dissemination. Still, algorithms and filters have become elements that assign us an identity and determine what information we can see and in what format. However, the relationship between the increasing volume of information and the processes by which the human mind processes this information is not always linear. In other words, it is known that the processing of increasing amounts of information and the resulting cognitive load affect our cognitive structure at different levels. For example, although digital tools or methods offer unlimited data processing or storage capacity, the human mind is still limited in processing a certain amount of data at a given time. As data increases, uncertainty does not decrease; instead, the human mind uses shortcuts under the influence of ambiguous information or information overload. While these mental shortcuts provide advantages in performing automated tasks or making quick decisions, they can also create cognitive biases and weaknesses.

On the other hand, *information overload* can dull individuals' ability to judge accuracy and reach conclusions. In the dilemma between the possibilities offered by technology and cognitive limitations/weaknesses, the new environment shaped by digitalization, which can directly intervene in individuals' cognitive processes, has brought the concept of cognitive security to the forefront, going beyond traditional understandings of information security. While conventional information security focuses on the integrity or accessibility of information, cognitive security is primarily concerned with protecting individuals from exploitation of their cognitive weaknesses and preserving decision-making processes free from manipulation (Bone & Lee, 2023; Huang & Zhu, 2023).

The reference object of cognitive security often goes beyond the individual, and the dynamics of the most fundamental relationships between societies and states are also affected by this process. For example, states or other political actors can attempt to influence the outcomes of social or political events by manipulating digital tools and circulating information in various ways. These tools can be used within states and on their citizens, as well as on the populations of other countries. For example, Backes and Swab's work on the Russian Federation and the Baltic countries examines how cyber and information-based operations can interfere with voters' thinking and decision-making processes in political elections (Backes & Swab, 2019). Princeton University's dataset provides a detailed framework on how social media, propaganda, and disinformation tools are used to influence political processes (Martin et al., 2024).

In light of these examples, it would not be wrong to say that the spread of misinformation in today's digital communication environment is no longer random but has become information operations carried out consciously by organized actors. The "Cognitive Warfare" framework developed by NATO emphasizes that contemporary conflicts are no longer physical but mental. According to this approach, individuals' thinking, decision-making cycles, and emotional reflexes are now directly targeted areas (NATO, 2021). Grahm and Taipalus define this situation as "the weaponization of the cognitive dimension" and argue that perception systems are targeted across a spectrum ranging from decision-makers to ordinary citizens (Grahm & Taipalus, 2025).

The issues of cognitive security are not limited to their impact on perception and decision-making processes. Comprehensive research by the RAND Corporation has shown that these attacks carried out through digital networks shape not only individuals' access to information, but also their trust in information and their epistemological orientations (Waltzman, 2017). Maintaining social order and predicting behavior patterns will be complex in an environment where individuals lose trust in information. This will profoundly affect the state's ability to govern, one of its essential qualities. In this sense, technology plays a unique role. In particular, the algorithmic structures of social media platforms and visual and audio synthetic media elements that can be prepared with artificial intelligence tools prepare the ground for the rapid spread of disinformation by directing individuals to echo chambers that confirm their own truths (Maci et al., 2024).

The concept of cognitive security, which is also frequently used in cybersecurity, does not focus solely on the cyber domain. Indeed, cognitive security is an interdisciplinary security paradigm that aims to protect the mental autonomy, social immunity, and democratic resilience of individuals. In other words, cognitive security has now established itself in the rapidly developing security studies literature, demonstrating how information can be manipulated to target perceptions and decision-making processes. However, much of the recently developing cognitive security literature has focused on malicious, false, and incomplete information, particularly the concept of disinformation. In addition, efforts have increased to increase social flexibility and resilience against these threats in recent years. Understanding how threat actors carry out information-based operations and the methodology they use is relatively lacking in all these studies. In this context, the following questions are essential to address in this study: How has cognitive security transformed into a security paradigm in the new threat environment? Is disinformation merely false information, or does it function as a cognitive weapon? As a cognitive weapon, how does disinformation target the human mind and decision-making structure?

II. The Concept of Cognitive Security

Cognitive security is a multi-layered security approach developed against attacks on the human mind's processes of accessing, processing, evaluating, and making decisions about information. This concept aims not only to protect individuals from misinformation but also to comprehensively safeguard perception systems, belief structures, and the attention economy (Bone & Lee, 2023; Huang & Zhu, 2023). Cognitive Security encompasses all applications, methodologies, and efforts to defend against social engineering attempts—intentional and unintentional manipulation and interventions that disrupt cognition and meaning. In this sense, cognitive security is equivalent to efforts to protect cybersecurity infrastructure. However, this concept focuses on protecting individuals' "perceptual infrastructure."

Two models stand out among the theoretical foundations of cognitive security. The first is James Bone's "*Homo Periculum*," or risk-focused human approach. According to this model, individuals lose their capacity for rational evaluation due to constant exposure to information and begin to make intuitive, emotional, and anchor-influenced decisions (Bone & Lee, 2023). Crises, uncertainty, and emotional intensity further exacerbate these cognitive weaknesses. This makes individuals susceptible to misinformation, manipulative discourse, and alternative realities.

The second approach is related to Huang and Zhu's systems science model. According to this model, cognitive security is not solely defense-based; it also includes dynamic, adaptive, and predictive mechanisms. The systems science approach offers a strategic analysis through feedback loops, threshold effects, and fragility clusters. This shifts the reference object of security from the individual level to the level of social systems and media architectures (Huang & Zhu, 2023). In contrast to cognitive security's decision-making and reasoning processes, RAND's "Truth Decay" concept establishes a link between cognitive security and the systematic weakening of an individual's trust in information sources. Additionally, it underscores that this erosion of trust extends beyond the individual level and permeates institutional epistemology. Within this realm of cognitive security, the diminishing trust in state institutions, journalism, and science threatens social consensus, collective meaning-making, and political stability. (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018).

Cognitive security differs significantly from traditional security and cybersecurity paradigms in that it focuses on individuals' and societies' ability to reason, make decisions, and process information, prioritizing the preservation of trust. For example, while traditional cybersecurity focuses on data and communication infrastructure, cognitive security views the human mind as an "attack surface" (Waltzman, 2017). Some sources highlight the differences between Cognitive Security and Cognition Security (CogSec) when examining cognitive security. Accordingly, Cognitive Security focuses on the security of machines and aims to ensure their security through artificial intelligence and other technologies. CogSec, on the other hand, is closer to the understanding of cognitive security in this article, as its primary focus is examining the interaction between humans and content and human-machine integrated security (Guo et al., 2021).

Attempts to disrupt the OODA loop (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act), which plays a vital role in the decision-making cycle, are one of the main areas of focus in disinformation and, in this context, cognitive security. Interdisciplinary literature suggests that cognitive security requires consideration within security studies and in conjunction with psychology, media studies, political behavior, algorithmic governance, and ethics. As emphasized in the work compiled by Maci and others, discursive manipulations reshape individuals' frameworks for understanding the world and blur the line between reality and fiction (Maci et al., 2024). In conclusion, cognitive security is an interdisciplinary, multi-level, and dynamic security paradigm that aims to protect not only the individual's mental autonomy, the society's epistemological immunity, and democracy's cognitive infrastructure, but also its physical and technological infrastructure, unlike information security and cybersecurity. Consequently, cognitive security should be regarded not solely as a technological safeguard but also as an ethical, cultural, and pedagogical defense framework.

III. The Disinformation Ecosystem and Information Disorder

Although the digital age appears to have democratized access to information, manipulating this access through artificial content or the incomplete/incorrect presentation of reality has led to severe fractures in individuals' perceptions. In this environment, misinformation is no longer merely the

result of individual error or inattention; it has become a phenomenon strategically disseminated by organized structures. In this context, "information disorder" is not just about the accuracy of content, but also a multidimensional problem related to the content's intent, context, and impact (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Wardle and Derakhshan's taxonomy divides information disorder into three main categories: misinformation (incorrect information), disinformation (intentionally false information), and malinformation (accurate information taken out of context with the intent to cause harm). This distinction highlights the need to analyze content disseminated in digital environments based on accuracy, intention, and context. This distinction allows us to understand disinformation as "lies" and a communication strategy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

This strategy relies not only on content production but also on how this content is circulated. Social media algorithms provide false information with an artificial circulation advantage by making content that triggers emotional responses more visible (Waltzman, 2017). This situation brings the filter bubble effect to the fore. The filter bubble effect arises when algorithms used by digital platforms selectively present content that closely aligns with users' previous behavior, interests, and opinions. This personalized filtering traps users in a metaphorical "bubble" where they mostly encounter information that confirms their beliefs and interact with like-minded individuals. This leads to the formation of echo chambers and increased social polarization. In other words, algorithmic steering effectively traps individuals in echo chambers and gradually weakens their efforts to verify information. Especially with the "filter bubble effect," users are exposed to content that reinforces their worldviews and develops immunity to different perspectives (Pariser, 2011). As a result, critical thinking skills decline, and the desire and ability to understand other perspectives or engage constructively with them weaken, negatively impacting public discourse, diversity, and democratic processes.

Lukasz Olejnik's analyses define disinformation as a discursive problem and a hybrid propaganda tool with technical, psychological, and strategic dimensions. Disinformation operations produce customized content tailored to the target audience, creating psychological impact through AI-powered fake videos (Deep Fake), manipulative images, and statements taken out of context. This content is distributed based on individuals' digital footprints through micro-targeting and is effective through social fault lines. On the other hand, algorithmic steering also allows threat actors to deliver their messages to the correct targets with little effort (Olejnik, 2025).

Furthermore, bot networks, fake accounts, and organized troll groups amplify the circulation of such content, creating a "reality illusion." Waltzman's definition of the "cognitive attack cycle" demonstrates how this illusion is institutionalized through message design, emotional triggering, timing, and repetition (Waltzman, 2017). These attacks aim to destabilize society epistemologically and rapidly erode trust-based information infrastructures by increasing frequency and changing the direction of information differently, based on the principle of stimulus-response.

As emphasized in the work of Maci and others, the language of disinformation is not only content but also a discursive strategy. This discourse is constructed through structures such as the "us" and "them" distinction, crisis frameworks, conspiracy narratives, and distrust of authority, thereby reconstructing the individual's world of meaning (Maci et al., 2024). In this context, disinformation is not merely a distortion of truth but also an attempt to establish an alternative truth regime. The threat actor can

project their desired alternative truth through a single event or develop a different reality by choosing different concepts and relationships.

In conclusion, the disinformation ecosystem can be regarded as a multi-layered attack environment. Technological infrastructures, psychological and cognitive vulnerabilities, and social cracks come together in this environment. In this context, information is no longer merely transmitted, but manipulated, reframed, and reproduced as a power source. Within this framework, the question of how cognitive security can be established in this environment brings with it both technical and ethical, discursive, and political responsibilities.

IV. Disinformation Attack Chain Model

As mentioned in the introduction, although disinformation is frequently used in the context of threats targeting cognitive security, there are few studies on how disinformation is instrumentalized and how it systematically targets the cognitive layer. In response to this gap, the FERMI project, for example, argues that disinformation attacks are carried out in five steps: target discovery, content weaponization, dissemination of weaponized content through appropriate channels, exploitation of the target, and post-exploitation tactics such as erasing traces or denial (FERMI, 2023). The European Union has also proposed a standard five-element framework model for analyzing disinformation within its structure. Also known as the ABCDE framework, this proposal focuses on analyzing disinformation incidents based on the elements of *Actor*, *Behavior*, *Content*, *Degree*, and *Effect* (Pamment, 2020).

The Disinformation Attack Model, developed by the Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) and detailing these steps, reveals how these attacks disrupt the OODA cycles that systematize decision-making processes. According to this model, disinformation is not an instantaneous and spontaneous activity, but rather involves many steps, from understanding the structure of the target audience to acquiring an organic follower base and proposing an alternative reality (CSET, 2021).

In this sense, disinformation is not merely a distortion at the content level; it can be seen as a strategic and multi-stage attack model that aims to disrupt the target audience's perception systems, decision cycles, and emotional balance. One of the methodologies intensively used in cybersecurity, the Cyber Kill Chain developed by Lockheed Martin, provides researchers with a valuable framework for understanding disinformation attack chains. According to this model, a cyber-attack has seven typical stages: Reconnaissance, Weaponization, Delivery, Exploitation, Installation, Command and Control, and Target Action (Lockheed Martin, 2024). The underlying logic of this model is to help organizations detect and prevent threats at different stages and enable cybersecurity experts to stop attacks in their early stages. Similar to the cyber kill chain, the "information operations kill chain" described by Schneier provides a suitable framework for understanding disinformation attacks. In this model, attackers are said to follow steps such as identifying cracks in society, creating a barrage of alternative narratives, wrapping them in a veneer of reality, creating target audiences, concealing themselves, and encouraging audiences to believe the narratives (Schneier, 2023).

Within this framework, CSET's "Disinformation Kill Chain" approach, adapted for disinformation, defines the process of disinformation attacks in seven basic stages: discovery, structure building, content building and capture, delivery, amplification, troll patrol, and execution. This model adapts the classic military kill chain logic to cognitive warfare and positions disinformation as a planned cognitive operation in the literature. The following sections explaining these seven stages are based

on a more detailed explanation of the structure proposed by CSET, as well as NATO doctrines, RAND reports, and the recent scholarly work (Bone & Lee, 2023; Huang & Zhu, 2023; Maci vd., 2024; Olejnik, 2025).

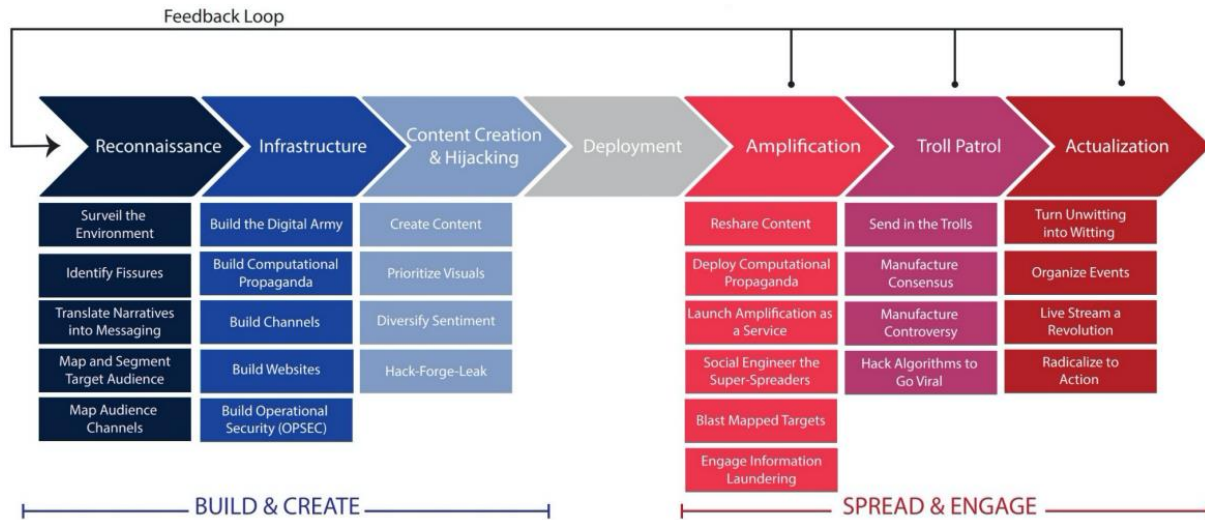


Figure 1. Disinformation Attack Chain

Source: (CSET, 2021)

1. Reconnaissance

The first disinformation attack chain stage is a strategic cognitive discovery process. During this stage, the attacker analyzes the target audience's social vulnerabilities, cultural sensitivities, identity structures, and perception architecture. This analysis is carried out along three principal axes: psychographic mapping, identification of weaknesses in the target based on open-source intelligence (OSINT), and determination of emotional triggers. Individuals' emotional tendencies and identity affiliations are extracted through social media interactions, hashtag (#) analysis, location-based data, Google Trends, and social media platforms' trending topics lists. Strategic gaps are identified through social conflict history, security crises, political polarization, and lack of trust in the media. In light of this data, the historical or emotional narratives to which target groups are sensitive are identified through the messaging of narratives. During the discovery process, the attacker can also identify partners and accounts that will help spread the message (FERMI, 2023). By mapping the digital behavior of the target audience, the platforms and communication channels that should be used are determined. In other words, the sociological and psychological background of the target group is systematically analyzed, and the results are used to guide the operational process through a vulnerability mapping.

2. Construction

The construction phase often follows the discovery phase. This phase aims to establish the digital and organizational infrastructure of the disinformation operation. This step creates a digital army, fake accounts, bot networks, avatars, and automated content production systems. Additionally, artificial intelligence tools have begun to be actively used in this construction process to create synthetic media such as convincing identities and realistic visuals (U.S. Army Mad Scientist Initiative, 2020). Digital networks are structured to automate and accelerate propaganda processes and distribute targeted content according to specific timelines. Then, channels are created on Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Discord, and alternative social media platforms to influence different groups.

At the same time, websites are set up to serve as fake news sources that support disinformation. These websites are designed to look like news platforms, expert analysis pages, or public information databases. To establish credibility for the content, networks of experts, journalists, and even think tanks can be constructed (CISA, 2025). Operational security (OPSEC) is critical in this process, as the operation must not be traced, and the source of the content must remain confidential.

3. Content Creation and Hijacking

The content production step in the disinformation chain involves creating information and constructing credible, manipulative, and emotionally triggering narratives. Content is designed to align with the target audience's worldview. This content is often structured to bypass an individual's cognitive immunity system, using a structure that counters the "inoculation theory" to overcome attitude resistance. During the capture process, content with high emotional intensity, particularly based on fear, anger, and hope, is shared more frequently to leave more lasting cognitive traces. In addition to the target audience's emotions, existing social divisions can also be targeted (FERMI, 2023). Content often mimics the aesthetic structure of real news, includes fake expert opinions, and is supported by images taken out of context. Deep Fake videos, WhatsApp message chains, fake public opinion polls, and alternative historical narratives are rapidly produced with AI-powered production tools. Images are updated, reshaped according to events, supported by leaked documents, and circulated to increase credibility.

4. Deployment

The content prepared during construction is strategically directed to reach the target audience. This distribution process is planned with timing and language formats appropriate for the platforms' algorithms. Content is first shared at a low intensity and then amplified as it gains traction. This process is carried out simultaneously with cross-platform use, i.e., publishing the duplicate content in different versions on different platforms. Recent research has shown that search engines can reinforce belief in misinformation (Aslett et al., 2024; Leffer, 2023) and that search engines are being weaponized in disinformation attack chains (DISARM Foundation, 2025).

Just as important as the effectiveness of the content is targeting the right audience, publishing at the right time, and on the right platforms. For example, studies have found that conservative individuals are more likely to spread misinformation, while negative news spreads faster (Guo et al., 2021). Depending on the digital habits of the target audience, platforms such as TikTok and Reddit are preferred for young people, Facebook and YouTube for middle-aged groups, and Telegram for activist circles. These preferences are also shaped by the platforms' virality, or potential for widespread dissemination, and their content moderation policies. Platforms with weak oversight or no censorship are particularly favored, and algorithmic content recommendation systems are manipulated to accelerate content spread. The duplicate content is published simultaneously under different headlines and from different sources to reinforce the narrative's credibility. This strategy is called "narrative laundering." In other words, content is repeatedly disseminated from various sources and in different forms, so the audience perceives this information as the product of natural circulation. The phrase "optimizing content for specific platforms" is the tactical equivalent of this stage.

5. Amplification

This stage involves amplification operations that enable content to go viral. Repeated sharing of content, the launch of computerized propaganda campaigns, and the involvement of actors offering "propaganda as a service" are all part of this stage. Social engineers and high-follower accounts,

referred to as "super spreaders", legitimize the content. Additionally, research shows that 63% of influencers and high-follower content creators do not verify content before sharing it, inadvertently participating in the amplification phase (UN News, 2024). In this context, as followers share content, disinformation appears increasingly organic. In the amplification phase, content focused on specific targets is designed to attack or discredit individuals with opposing views. Finally, through information laundering activities, this content gains visibility in different sources and enters circulation as if it were "real information."

The potential impact of content is determined by the platforms on which it is published and the depth of its circulation. Flooding, or information bombardment techniques, obscure real information (DISARM Foundation, 2025; European Parliament, 2025). Content visibility is also increased through bot accounts and fake user profiles at this stage. At this stage, users interact with the content through likes, comments, and shares, signaling to algorithms that the content is "popular." Hashtag storms lead to content being presented to more users by algorithms. Content is also designed to be compliant with Search Engine Optimization (SEO), gaining visibility on news sites like advertisements. At the end of this process, individuals begin to see the duplicate content repeatedly from different sources and in various formats. Known as "repetition priming," this cognitive effect causes the content to be perceived as more reliable because it has been encountered before. This stage causes individuals to adapt their beliefs to the content unconsciously and exposes them to systematic perception manipulation.

6. Troll Patrol

The concept of "troll," which emerged in the early 1990s to describe user behavior and became part of internet culture, has evolved into a significant component of disinformation attack chains and even a business model today (Global Investigative Journalism Network, 2023). In the troll phase of a disinformation attack, troll groups or accounts known as sock puppets are used to control how content will resonate in social media discussions. Trolls are directed to specific posts at this stage to make distracting, provocative, or manipulative comments. At the same time, attackers create artificial consensus; for example, fake supportive comments are used to make the content appear to be endorsed by different segments of society. In some cases, attackers escalate the discussion to silence opposing views. By manipulating platform algorithms that work through interaction intensity and display frequency, content visibility is further increased, and the viral effect is deepened (DISARM Foundation, 2025).

7. Reinforcement

The real danger of disinformation is not its temporary effect, but its ability to become permanent over time and create an entrenched perception. To maintain permanence in the information environment, it is first necessary for attackers to conceal themselves and establish a dimension of deniability. Within the framework of DISARM, the concealment of the attacker is described in conjunction with tactics for concealing information assets, infrastructure, and operational activities. In this context, it is essential to conceal the link between the source and the attacker, prevent the tracking of technological traces, and mask the individuals who produce the content and control the strategy. At this point, the main goal is to extend the impact of disinformation as much as possible by continuously manipulating algorithms and ensuring the continuity of content and accounts (DISARM Foundation, 2025).

In the persistence phase, content is updated to link it to new events, narratives are expanded, and content is adapted to different cultural or geographical contexts. This final phase represents the stage where disinformation campaigns lead to cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Individuals who consume the content begin to reproduce and disseminate it over time. The disinformation campaign reproduces itself through these individuals, who consciously or unconsciously become new disseminators. Events are organized; offline protests, online campaigns, or networks that can mobilize quickly in times of crisis begin to form. In some cases, this can escalate to mass actions or direct violent actions. This process can lead to behavioral radicalization among the target audience.

At this stage of disinformation, the narrative does not merely circulate; it is also legitimized. To this end, content is supported by academic-looking analyses, fake expert opinions, and religious or national symbols. As defined by Bone and Lee (Bone & Lee, 2023), individuals are no longer merely misinformed; they have also become resistant to alternative reality constructs. Their reflex to question has been paralyzed, and fundamental concepts of reality have been displaced. Therefore, disinformation is not merely the production of content but also the construction of a regime of reality. One of the most critical dimensions of this phase is that narratives gain public legitimacy by intertwining with collective memory and cultural symbols. Disinformation penetrates the individual's belief system and the fabric of social narratives. The manipulation of historical traumas, national myths, and religious discourse renders the narrative unquestionable. Thus, content is no longer perceived as "information" but as a culturally internalized "form of truth". Ethical reflexes are also disabled in this process because individuals begin to see manipulative narratives as part of their value system. Ethical judgment, epistemological questioning, and critical distance gradually weaken. In this form, disinformation targets the information ecosystem and the social immune system. For this reason, this stage is a multi-layered attack that erodes cognitive and cultural resistance.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that disinformation targeting cognitive security is not merely a content-related issue, but rather a multi-layered, systematic, and strategic form of attack. On the other hand, just as attackers' behavioral patterns are systematized in cybersecurity to prevent attacks before they occur or to conduct retrospective analyses, studies that view disinformation as a weapon have begun to develop similar models. The Disinformation Death Chain model, which forms the basis of this study, and the analysis conducted through the current literature show that each stage of disinformation is interwoven with cognitive, technical, discursive, and psychological dimensions. This process, which extends from the preparation stage to the perpetuation of the effect, exposes individuals to misinformation, disrupts their decision-making cycle, produces social insecurity, and systematically transforms their perception of reality.

The seven-step disinformation attack chain described in this study targets not only individuals' information acquisition processes, but also their perception architecture, sense of identity, and relationship with collective memory. Disinformation thus directly attacks the individual's mental capacity and the resilience of democracy, the sustainability of social consensus, and the public legitimacy of truth. In this sense, as a cognitive security threat, disinformation attacks extend beyond the individual and have become a matter of national and social security.

Nevertheless, the resilience policies and strategies developed in response to this chain of attacks have often been reduced to verification platforms, content control algorithms, or media literacy education. These technical and individualistic approaches fail to adequately account for the narrative power of

disinformation, its emotional economy, and its relationship with cultural codes. They are particularly unable to respond to the steps taken by disinformation to become entrenched or established. Therefore, the most crucial argument of this study is that the fight against disinformation should not only be considered in terms of access to accurate information, but also in terms of producing resilient narratives, building cognitive security, and developing ethical reality defense. In this sense, just as cybersecurity has ceased to be merely a technical security problem and has become a security sector requiring socio-technical and multi-actor resilience policies (Bıçakcı & Evren, 2025), the fight against disinformation must go beyond the regulation of platform policies, self-regulation, or individual verification mechanisms. Given the multi-actor nature of the trust element, the public and private sectors must work together against disinformation, especially in crises such as disasters.

In this context, the primary recommendation for future research is to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to disinformation analysis. With the combined contributions of sociology, psychology, cognitive sciences, communication theory, and artificial intelligence ethics, defense models can be developed, and structures that increase social resilience can be established. In addition, digital platforms and policymakers must be subject to transparency obligations and accountability solutions that guarantee algorithmic impartiality. As long as technological solutions are not framed by ethical principles and the fight against disinformation is left to technological determinism, the ground will be laid for new types of disinformation cycles. The role of Generative Artificial Intelligence in disinformation, both in its weaponization and the fight against it, should not be overlooked. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), established in 2021 by technology and media organizations, can be considered an essential step toward ensuring open standards and transparency for the origin and integrity of digital content (Bateman & Jackson, 2024; C2PA, 2021). Similarly, as a project funded by the European Union, EUNOMIA aims to create a digital platform that goes beyond the "like" culture on social media and establishes more conscious relationships between users and social media content (EUNOMIA, 2025).

In conclusion, disinformation has evolved from the classic paradigm of information pollution to become one of the most sophisticated tools of hybrid warfare. Combating it will require verifying content and redefining the epistemological, cultural, and ethical boundaries of our relationship with truth. Given the multi-stakeholder nature of content production, control, and infrastructure ownership today, it is unrealistic for state institutions alone to deal with this form of attack. There is a clear need for joint cooperation platforms involving the private sector, academic institutions, NGOs, and the state. The Disinformation Attack Chain model approaches disinformation as content-based, process-based, strategic, and systemic form of attack. Each link in this chain is interwoven with cognitive and technological, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Breaking the chain requires more than technical solutions; it demands multi-layered interventions such as narrative resilience, emotional intelligence, media architecture awareness, and decision-making cycle health.

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Is There Weakness in the Essence of Truth, and Deception in the Essence of Power? Looking at the Post-Truth Era in the Light of Hannah Arendt

Abstract

Although the term “post-truth” first came into use in the 1990s, the struggle between truth and lie inherent in the concept dates back much further. However, particularly in the UK with Brexit, the debates that began during the 2016 US presidential election, and the growing strength of populist political movements, post-truth seems to be increasingly emerging as a historical phenomenon. Today, it can be said that we are in a democratic/political crisis in which our ability to distinguish truth from lie and fact from fiction is gradually weakening, albeit in different forms and degrees, and that this is partly due to the comprehensive technological transformation that is deeply affecting our private and public lives. As the most striking manifestation of this crisis at the social and political levels, post-truth is the name given to this historical situation in which truth has lost ground in the age-old struggle between truth and lie, influenced by new developments in the contemporary world. This leads us to reflect on the striking and profound observations made by Hannah Arendt, one of the unique thinkers of the 20th century, regarding the tense relationship between truth/correctness, lies, and politics, and to consider how we can make a meaningful interpretation of the problems of the contemporary world in light of these observations.

Keywords

Factual truths, judgment, politics, shared world/public sphere, common sense, parrhesia, Hannah Arendt

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Introduction

Although the term “post-truth/postfaktisch” was first used in the late 20th century, it became widespread after being chosen as the word of the year in 2016 by both the Oxford Dictionaries and the German Language Society. The term is used to describe “a situation and politics in which public opinion is more receptive to emotional discourse and beliefs than to facts and truths” (Sepczynska, 2019, p.209). Notably, when we speak of post-truth, that is, when we focus on the meaning implied by the concept, we are implicitly accepting that an irreversible transformation has taken place. In this case, it means we believe that we have moved from an “age of truth” into a “different” social and cultural environment (Breul, 2022, p.63). I am of the opinion, however, that we have never actually lived in such an “age of truth” or in an era where truth “reigned supreme.” On the other hand, if we focus on the word “rather” in the definition, we are not talking about the annulment, absence, or aftermath of truth; instead, we are emphasizing the weakening of its power. Put more plainly, when we refer to the “post-truth era,” we are describing a historical condition in which truth has become, or is being rendered, insignificant (McIntyre, 2018, p.5).

Although their manifestations and degrees differ, I believe we are facing a democratic/political crisis in which our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood and fact from fiction is increasingly weakening—a process that is also deeply influenced by a comprehensive technological transformation affecting both our private and public lives. One of the expressions of this crisis at the democratic/political level, which also has structural causes at the economic and social levels, appears to be this historical situation in which truth is losing ground in the age-old struggle between truth and lies, influenced by contemporary developments in the modern world. This, in turn, leads us to reflect on the striking and profound insights of one of the 20th century’s most unique thinkers, Hannah Arendt, regarding the tense relationship between truth/factuality, falsehood, and politics, and to ask how we can make a meaningful interpretation of the problems of the contemporary world in light of these insights.

It should first be noted that Arendt, when considering her evaluations across different works on the subject, speaks of three types of truth. The first of these “types” of truth, which will be clarified further throughout this study, consists of rational truths, encompassing mathematics, science, and philosophy (Arendt, 2014, p.312). The second type of truth—on which this study will focus most extensively—arises in the realm of constantly changing human affairs and consists of events and facts produced by human actions and deeds. Arendt refers to these as “factual truths.” Finally, the type of truth that is often overlooked or not emphasized in studies on Arendt is the truth established through mutual discussion and deliberation, which becomes possible when people’s opinions meet in the public world. In this sense, these are the truths historically constructed by every political community. While this study will address all three types of truth discussed by Arendt, it will focus particularly on the relationship between the second type of truth and the interplay of lies and politics.

When reading all of Arendt’s works, it becomes clear that they are interwoven like a network. While this is a source of great excitement for the reader, it presents a challenging task for a scholar attempting to explain her ideas. Because each concept in her works is connected to others, it is necessary to construct a similar network of relationships when explaining the subjects she addresses. For example, when explaining the relationship between factual truths and political thought, it is essential to also address the activity of thinking itself and the faculty of judgment. The faculty of judgment, in turn, invites reflection on the relationship between the common world and politics as

the space of shared sensibility. Examining all of this in relation to the historical condition known as post-truth requires considering her views on both the modern political lie and the role of the narrator of truth. Accordingly, this article is written with the view that Arendt's discussions in her works—shaped by the experiences of the 20th century—can help us understand “post-truth,” which has become a historical phenomenon by the early 21st century, and shed light on the formation of our opinions. Within this framework, the article first focuses on Arendt's conceptualization of the three types of truth, then explores the relationship between factual truths and thinking as well as the mental faculty of judgment. Next, it examines the significance of the common world as the space of shared sensibility, which occupies a central place in Arendt's political theory, and considers the implications of its loss for today's world. Finally, the value of being a narrator of truth under the post-truth conditions of the contemporary world is investigated, and the legacy of Arendt's political theory is summarized.

Factual Truths and Politics

In 1961, Hannah Arendt, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 2009), which contains her impressions and evaluations of the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Israel, sparked a debate on “truth” and “falsehood.” In response, she wrote the essay *Truth and Politics*, opening its introduction with the question: “Is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful?” (Arendt, 2014, p. 308). Here, Arendt reminds us that truth, which remains “powerless” in the public realm—the primary sphere in which humans experience their existence—also has its “reality” at stake. Truth acquires reality precisely through being seen and heard by people in the public sphere, and through being repeated and rearticulated over and over.

However, it should be noted that here we are not speaking of the “philosophical (rational) truth” of the philosopher, who has freed themselves from chains and endured great suffering to behold things as they are, but rather of the events and facts that emerge from human actions and deeds—events that carry contingency. These are the kinds of events we say “could have happened otherwise”; their contingency is considered in this context. Moreover, Arendt clarifies this notion of contingency by writing, “nothing could ever happen if reality did not kill, by definition, all the other potentialities originally inherent in any given situation” (Arendt, 2014, p.328). Thus, although these events and deeds, once realized, become truths that set the boundaries of thought, they are different from the philosophical truth that can be reached through the most advanced use of reason—a distinction that forms the basis of a debate inherent in the Western philosophical tradition. Unlike philosophical truths, which ontologically concern the nature of things and reveal “what they really are in themselves,” carrying a correspondingly “despotic” character, factual truths rely on the support of citizens' changing opinions within the ever-flowing realm of human relations. In this sense, factual truth is always relational, dependent on and grounded in witnesses. It exists as long as it is spoken about and as long as time continues. By its very nature, it is political (Sarı, 2018, pp.152–153; Nelson, 1978, p. 278). Factual truth provides the epistemic foundation for political thought. As Arendt puts it: “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation” (Arendt, 2014, p.322). Accordingly, factual truths delineate the limits of the opinions we hold in the political sphere, where we have the freedom to act and to bring about change. Yet it is precisely this boundary-setting capacity that makes factual truths the main target of tyrants, who fear the competition of a constraining power they cannot monopolize (Enaudeau & Bonnigal-Katz, 2007, p.1035). Those who arrogantly believe that they alone can know the truth, in a state of hubris, presume they can overcome every human limit. Boundless pride, which shuts its eyes to all

forms of debate, makes politics impossible by imposing a “single-truth stance” and disregarding limits. However, political matters cannot be governed by immutable principles of truth; there is no absolute truth in politics. For this reason, factual truths are fragile under the assault or threat of power. Their protection depends on the will, actions, and opinions of people who accept them as the boundaries of the political-ethical sphere. Arendt expresses this fragility as follows: “Once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them (factual truths) back” (Arendt, 2014, p.313). Here, Arendt provides examples from both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. However, the fragility of factual truths is not something that can be demonstrated solely through the actions of totalitarian regimes. For instance, it was only in the late 1990s that we learned about the existence of a strong women’s movement in the last century of the Ottoman Empire, and that Ottoman feminists, like their Western counterparts, fought for human rights by asking, “Are we not human too?” As a factual truth, the Ottoman Women’s Movement could only come to light again thanks to the activism and will of these women. Today, we can study and research the Ottoman Women’s Movement as a factual truth, forming our opinions about it. Thus, factual truths provide the epistemic foundation for our opinions. At the same time, our opinions encompass multiple judgments regarding factual truths. This multiplicity of opinions reflects human plurality; each individual perceives the world from their own standpoint, implying their unique perspective (Berkday, 2012, p.117). When we exercise our faculty of judgment over the opinions we present in the public sphere, we consider their relation to factual truths and whether they are consistent. In expressing our opinion on an issue, we pay attention not only to the internal consistency of our arguments but also to their conformity with factual truths.

Alternative Truths, Factual Truths, and Shared Assumptions

So, what happens if factual truths turn into mere opinions, as targeted by the discourse of “alternative facts/truths”? Here, I am referring to a concept used to cover up the falsehood of lies that can, in principle, be proven false: “alternative facts/truths.” We first heard this term during Donald Trump’s first presidency in 2017, when his press secretary defended a false statement about the attendance at the presidential inauguration—despite live broadcasts showing otherwise—by labeling it as an “alternative fact,” a defense offered by the advisor to the U.S. President.

Arendt draws attention to the fragility of factual truths and their transformation into mere opinions with the following examples: “As if Germany’s support for Hitler, or the French army’s collapse before the German army in 1940, or the Vatican’s policies during World War II were not matters of historical record but simply a matter of opinion...” (Arendt, 2014, p.320). What I want to emphasize here is not alternative perspectives, but the danger posed by the discourse of alternative facts/truths. Arendt notes that when a fact becomes merely an opinion, it ultimately results in the loss of the shared world in which ideas can be exchanged and judgments made. Therefore, not only factual truths but also the political debate, exchange of views, and collective action capacity among citizens, as well as the common ethical-political ground on which they can realize these, and the truth that can only be reached when each person expresses their own point of view beginning with “it seems to me” (“dokei moi”) on this common ground, are lost. Truth that does not arise from the collective unity of citizens and a free environment of thought and discussion can only be tyrannical truth.

Arendt speaks of the quality of “truth” as it appears to everyone from their own standpoint; in other words, everyone perceives events and facts from their own perspective, which accounts for the plurality of opinions. If we recall that Arendt does not concern herself with truths beyond human knowledge—whether “divine” or “philosophical,” even if they exist—then what she refers to here are factual truths. At the same time, Arendt also speaks of the “truths” that humans produce collectively

in the public realm through their political existence, truths that are fabricated in the human-made common world. These truths, produced by the political community, also depend on the continuity of citizens' opinions in this regard. For the plural appearances and opinions to become truths, there must exist a public sphere, a shared world, where these differing views can come together, express themselves, and communicate through speech and action. When each citizen can freely express their opinions on a particular matter, the share of truth within their opinion becomes visible both to themselves and to others (Arendt, 2023, p. 17; Enaudeau & Bonnigal-Katz, 2007, p.1039). The more this sharing occurs with broad citizen participation, without fear of retaliation, and with each citizen able to state their opinion, make judgments, and critique others' opinions while facing their peers, the more the resulting truth can become a shared value for all and gain legitimacy. At this point, Arendt draws our attention to the second sentence of the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness..." Although Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration, may not have been aware of it, Arendt notes that he made a crucial admission regarding political matters (Arendt, 2014, p. 333). In this context, the text does not say "these are self-evident truths," but rather "we hold these to be true." In other words, it does not assert that "there exist certain truths imposed from outside upon us in the realm of human relations, transcendent to the political society we have collectively created, and we accept them." Arendt is speaking of a ground of truth in which the guarantee that humans are created equal by God and endowed with unalienable rights—also attributed to God—does not come from God himself, but from the words of the citizens. This implies that "equality in the political sense is a matter of opinion"; it can only gain reality as long as the political community is able to make it a truth of its own political existence and maintain it. Thus, in the realm of human relations, both factual truths and the shared truths of the community depend on the collective political will of people and on their agreement on certain principles. Connected to this, it becomes evident that each individual needs others to know whether their opinions align with facts or truths. Truth, therefore, requires a public sphere in which representations, opinions, and beliefs are shared, made visible, and expressed through speech and action. From this, two observations about Arendt's view can be made. First, everyone has their own opinions; each person constructs statements beginning with "it seems to me" or "it appears that." Second, no individual alone can know truth singularly; one cannot determine the share of truth in their own opinion independently and without additional effort. Therefore, one needs to hear, listen to, and understand others' opinions, to compare them with their own, and to present their own perspectives. For this reason, Arendt notes that it is no coincidence that Socrates applied his dialogical method in the city's agora to help bring truth into citizens' opinions. The philosopher's task was not to transmit "philosophical truths," but to make citizens "real". According to Arendt, the famous Delphic maxim "know thyself" is meaningful within this framework. Its significance lies in the understanding that "mortals cannot access absolute truth, which is the same for all and exists independently of and disconnected from everyone's existence (Arendt, 2023, p.21).

Each individual must do this: they must know that they are human and remain connected to their concrete existence. The "knowing that I do not know" in Socrates' aphorism, "the only thing I know is that I know nothing," expresses the awareness that no one knows the truth for themselves; this is why we need to know and understand the opinions of others. Therefore, for mortals limited to a knowledge constrained by the phenomenal world, what matters is making opinions truthful. The share of truth in each opinion can only emerge when each person presents their opinion to others and thereby exposes themselves both to themselves and to others. At the same time, Arendt emphasizes that opinion is not a "subjective illusion" or an "arbitrary distortion." Within this framework, the

fundamental criterion for the person presenting their opinion to others is that it “coheres with oneself,” which reminds us of another aphorism of Socrates: “It is better to fall into discord with the whole world, being one, than to fall into discord with myself” (Plato, 1987, 482c/d, pp. 41–42). This aphorism, which Arendt examines in depth as the last ethical criterion of human existence under totalitarian rule, pertains to the human mind’s faculty of thought and judgment.

Thinking, the Faculty of Judgment, and Factual Truths

At the core of what we can summarize as Arendt’s criterion of a person not contradicting themselves is the idea that even when a person abstracts themselves from the external world, when they are alone, and it appears as if they are by themselves, they are actually two: I and myself—a “one-in-two” (Arendt, 2018b, pp.85–86). What she refers to here is the human act of thinking. As Arendt adopts from Plato, thinking is defined as a silent dialogue between the self and oneself (Plato, 1992: 189e–190a; 2025: 263e–264d; Arendt, 2018b, pp. 92–93, 153): when I think, I enter into dialogue with myself. In such moments, there should be nothing for which the “I” cannot account to itself. However, when I am with others, I appear as one, as a singular presence. Only when I begin to think—which necessarily requires temporarily withdrawing from the realm of human affairs—am I alone with myself. Being able to hold myself accountable, and primarily to trust myself, requires that I be in accord with myself (Arendt, 2018b, pp. 85–86). No one can trust a person who is not in agreement with themselves—not even themselves. Only someone who knows how to live with themselves is fit to live among others. This aligns with the Anatolian saying, “Either be as you appear or appear as you are”: when seen by others, present to yourself the image you wish to convey (Arendt, 2023, p.23). Thus, a “liar” is not only condemned to the constant company of their deceitful self, but, as the saying “one knows the other as oneself” reminds us, they also see all others through the lens of their own actions (Arendt, 2023, p.24).

Someone who does not converse with themselves, who is not in dialogue with themselves, is not exercising their capacity to think. Arendt calls such a person “thoughtless” (Arendt, 2018a, p. 91). She notes that the faculty of judgment—the continuous ability to think and evaluate—applies “to everyone who is sane, regardless of how learned or ignorant, how intelligent or foolish” they may be, and therefore everyone should be expected to exercise it. Similarly, thoughtlessness is not “the weakness of the majority lacking mental capacity”; it is a condition that anyone, including scientists and academics, can fall into (Arendt, 1978, p. 191; 2018b, p. 91; Arendt et al., 2014, p.192). Thus, losing this faculty, which exists in everyone, is always a risk for all. In practice, thinking means making a fresh decision—judging—every time we encounter a difficulty in life. In this respect, choosing not to think can often seem easier than questioning established assumptions, traditions, or the demands of power. Arendt observes: “There is no dangerous thought; thinking itself is dangerous” (Arendt, 2018a, p. 206). The “wind of thought” uproots familiar, established signposts that people rely on. It is dangerous for those in positions of power under the given circumstances. These may be political leaders, but as in the case of Socrates’ trial, they can also be a significant portion of citizens (Arendt, 2018a, p.208). Those who fear the wind of thought simply choose not to think. Arendt describes the Nazi war criminal Eichmann as “thoughtless” (Arendt, 2009, p.59). Eichmann was not horrifying because he embodied cruelty and evil, but because he was so thoughtless that he could commit any atrocity. Precisely because he lacked the ability to hold himself accountable, he was capable of doing immense harm. In a society where thoughtless individuals like Eichmann form the majority, evil becomes ordinary. This is why Arendt’s book, based on her notes from observing the Eichmann trial, is titled with references to the “Banality of Evil.”

The Eichmann trial reminds us how vital it is to exercise the capacity to think in a human situation where established legal and moral rules have collapsed. This is because the faculty of thought has a liberating function over the capacity for judgment, which can be described as “the most political” of human mental faculties during such crises. While thinking relates to the representations of the invisible or non-existent and always generalizes, judgment—concerned with particulars—transforms thought into reality. Judgment brings thought into the world of appearances, making it accessible to others and presenting it to their evaluations. For this reason, Arendt writes, “The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge, but to tell right from wrong, and beautiful from ugly” (Arendt, 2018a, p. 224; 2018b, p. 175). In moments of crisis, when all legal and moral principles are overturned, the capacity for judgment can prevent disasters, and the act of judging, as the realization of thinking, constitutes communication for the “speaking, living being.” Unlike thinking, which is primarily an internal activity, judgment requires others—not just to make one’s voice heard and render oneself “visible,” but also to engage in action, as it depends on speech (Arendt, 2018a, p.147). This, in turn, leads Arendt—and indeed us—to reflect on the concepts of a shared world and a common sense.

The Common/Shared World as the Realm of Common Sense and Politics

Political thought is representational thought. Arendt, who masterfully “adapted” Kant’s monumental work *Critique of Judgment*, in which he develops his “aesthetic theory,” to her own political theory, points out that when we exercise our judgment in political matters, we form an idea (or should form one) by “imagining” the thoughts of our peers who are not present at the moment, thanks to our faculty of imagination (Arendt, 2018b, pp. 130–131). In this way, we “represent” the thoughts of others within our own minds through our imaginative capacity. Consequently, the more I can “expand” this representational thinking when it comes to matters concerning every member of the community, the greater the validity of my own thought. Indeed, Kant calls this the “enlarged mentality” (Kant, 2000, Ch. 40, pp. 158–160). The key condition here, however, is that while expanding my imagination, I must set aside my private interests and concerns (Enaudeau & Bonnigal-Katz, 2007, p.1041). If I can imagine how the world appears from the standpoint of every other person—beyond how it appears to me from my own position, which inevitably requires going beyond myself, my interests, and my concerns—then I am thinking and judging with an “enlarged mentality” (Arendt, 2014, pp. 326–327). Another crucial aspect of judgment is that it is one of the primary activities through which we “share the world with others.” The faculty that opens a person from the self to others—from my limited world to the shared world I inhabit with others—is the “common sense” (*sensus communis*), or shared sense. In Arendt’s words, inspired by Kant, common sense is “the sixth sense that we all share in common, but which goes beyond that to connect us with a common world, and thus makes a common world possible” (Arendt, 2023, p. 35; Kant, 2000, pp.126–127, 158–160). Arendt describes the function of common sense/practical reason as follows: “(...) Common sense precisely lays before us the shared nature of the world; we owe it to our completely private and subjective five senses, and the sensory data they provide, that they can conform to the objective world, which is not subjective, and which we possess and share in common with others” (Arendt, 2014, p. 299). In her work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt again refers to Kant in outlining the principles of common sense: “to think for oneself,” “to put oneself in the place of everyone else in thought,” and to be coherent or in agreement with oneself (Arendt, 2018a, p.512). These are the foundational requirements for our judgments to serve as the voice of “common sense” in the political realm. The inclusivity and validity of political judgments depend on being grounded in these principles.

Thus, it is the shared participation of people that constitutes “common sense.” The more individuals’ opinions and views one can incorporate into their own thinking when forming a judgment, the more

representative that judgment will be. Consequently, political judgments formed according to these principles are neither purely subjective, universal, nor entirely objective; rather, they are intersubjective and representative (Sepczynska, 2019, p.212). Such political judgment, without a doubt, is open to plurality. As Kant puts it, "Egoism can only be opposed by plurality; plurality is a state of mind in which the self does not wrap itself around the world as if it consists solely of itself but rather considers itself a citizen of the world" (Kant, 2006, p.18). On the other hand, Arendt wrote in the second half of the 20th century that we were living in a world where "common sense" had already fragmented. Now, let us examine the relationship between the loss of the common world and the loss of common sense, and its political implications.

The Loss of Common Sense and the Common World

The defining feature of modern society is not only that humans have become alienated from the earth and from themselves, but also that the interhuman common world (the public sphere) is under threat. Arendt places great importance on the issue of the "loss of the common world." The common world/public sphere forms the basis of both trust in oneself, who shares in human thought, and in the world that makes human experience possible. Naturally, a common world is necessary for the existence of an ethical-political ground on which we can establish our political and social relations. If there is no common world that binds us together, allows us to create meaningful relationships, solidarities, and networks, and enables us to disagree and argue while still being able to converse about these disagreements, making ourselves visible to one another, asserting our presence through words and deeds, and developing our personalities, then our perception of reality becomes unstable. How can we know what is true and what is false? How can we be sure of the reality of events and facts? Without a common world, our capacity for thought and judgment will practically cease to function. This is because the loss of the common world entails the loss of common sense. If we have lost the common world that brings us into contact with the judgments of others, allows us to compare our opinions, enables us to initiate new actions together through words and deeds, and preserves the principles and institutions we have collectively established, then we cannot develop a common sense. After all, how can I expand my mind, my representative thought, or reach an inclusive judgment without knowing what others think? Thus, the loss of the common world is not only the loss of common sense but also the loss of plurality. The loss of plurality means the cancellation of each human being's ability to express their unique individuality and to establish their own selfhood through words and deeds. In such a barren climate, a person can neither reflect on their own thoughts and actions nor develop the capacity to consider and judge those of others. Humans who have lost the ability to think and experience can only become puppets of oppressive regimes where a single opinion is imposed as truth; they can easily take the place of one another. In such a human condition, only the actions of the fanatic remain. Around the world today, the rise of obsessive fanaticism finds its roots in the absence of thinking and judgment. With obsessive fanatics, it is impossible to conduct objective evaluations, engage in debate, or establish meaningful relationships based on factual truths (Arendt et al., 2014, pp.92–93). This is because imposing a single opinion as truth in a political sphere based on the plurality of opinions means the destruction of politics itself. "Action" based on presenting a single opinion as truth is the non-political act of the fanatic.

Regarding the danger of the common/shared world—or, in political literature, the more commonly used term, the public sphere—falling into darkness or being lost, Richard Sennett writes in his authoritative 1977 work *The Fall of the Public Man* (Sennett, 2017) that this process began at the end of the 19th century. Thus, the destruction and gradual darkening of the common world/public sphere is a process that dates back a long time. So, is there really a difference between today's so-called post-

truth era and the concept of the “loss of the common world,” which began at the end of the 19th century and became an evident crisis in Western civilization during the final quarter of the 20th century? It can be argued that what we are experiencing today is a deepening of the crisis and a stage in which it manifests itself much more clearly. Indeed, Ralph Keyes, in his book *The Post-Truth Era*, provides perhaps a small but meaningful clue about this “radicalizing” crisis. Keyes writes: “While lies have accompanied humanity’s long journey, they were historically always associated, in one way or another, with guilt, shame, or embarrassment; today, however, there is a radical shift in this relationship” (Keyes, 2021, p.13). According to Keyes, contemporary humans play with truth and do not feel the moral burden caused by lies. Yet, when considered alongside Arendt’s observations on the “modern political lie,” it becomes clear that Keyes’ claim is not entirely new. Arendt had already analyzed how lies became organized lies under totalitarian regimes, how truth was manipulated within a system where organized lies formed the ideology, and how the moral burden of these lies was not shouldered by the masses who believed in the ideology. On the other hand, what is “new” about the post-truth historical situation is that, even without the pressure of any totalitarian terror, a significant portion of the mass society loses the significance of lies (fabricated, intentionally false, invented, etc.) in the formation of their opinions, even when they are aware of them, coupled with a kind of moral retreat along the lines of “so what if it’s a lie.” Thus, we are living in a human condition in which, in a social-political climate where the common/public world has fragmented or been plunged into darkness (in today’s world, this fragmentation or darkness can certainly vary according to state governance), those who manipulate truth and do not assume moral responsibility for lies are increasingly numerous, and are either taking over or attempting to take over institutions and the political stage. This constitutes an endeavor to eliminate human plurality and the capacity of people to initiate new things through their words and actions. Arendt had warned that such an endeavor could stem not only from totalitarianism but also from deception, lies, and manipulation within democratic regimes. Indeed, in her article “Lying in Politics,” published under the title *Crises of the Republic*, she sharply criticizes the Nixon administration’s Vietnam War policies, accusing the government of employing “deception, self-deception, image-making, ideological manipulation, and factlessness” (Arendt, 1972, p.44). There is no doubt that these accusations could still be applied to the policies of political powers in many states today. However, in the same article, Arendt expresses her belief that factual truths will ultimately prevail, that all lies of a deceitful government will be exposed, and that democratic society’s common sense will eventually render the government disgraced. Therefore, political lies and deceptions will be defeated by the supremacy of factual truths. In this context, Arendt sees universities, the judiciary, citizens exercising judgment, and the media as guarantors of factual truth (Sepczynska, 2019, p.215). Yet, as the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions have shown, not only government officials but also the media can play a significant role in image-making, deception, and politics of lies. Arendt is aware of this; in an interview, she states:

“The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please” (Arendt, 1978).

In today's world, in many countries, we are confronted with a historical situation in which the institutions that Arendt regarded as guarantors of "parrhesia" (here I use parrhesia not in the sense of frankness considered alongside sincerity, i.e., "speaking openly what one thinks," but rather in the sense of "courageously and openly stating factual truths and one's judgments about them") are being brought under the control of political powers. So, under these human conditions, what does it mean to be a "parrhesiastes" (a truth-teller)?

Being a "truth-teller" is a political stance

Arendt states that viewing politics from the perspective of truth means standing outside the political arena, and that this standpoint is the position of the "truth-teller." (Arendt, 2014, pp. 350–351). She warns that whenever the truth-teller directly intervenes in human affairs or resorts to the language of persuasion or violence, they risk losing this position. In other words, although factual truths are political, Arendt emphasizes that a truth-teller's engagement in the political sphere—aligning themselves with the interests and power groups of a particular side—carries the danger of compromising their expected neutrality, honesty, and independence. While I find Arendt's caution partly valid, I believe some objections can be raised. First, if we consider her statements as suggesting that refraining from expressing factual truths due to potential political consequences or manipulating facts for political engagement (both choices and actions being inherently political), would undermine one's or an institution's position as a truth-teller, then there is no reason to disagree. On the other hand, I argue that the position chosen by the truth-teller is itself profoundly political. Although being a "parrhesiastes"—speaking the truth as it is—may not always play a decisive role in changing the world or conditions (Arendt, 2014, pp. 338–339), in historical circumstances where lies and deliberate falsehoods are not only general political acts of power but also overlap with similar corruption within society, the use of parrhesia can serve not merely as a form of resistance but also as a crucial instrument in altering conditions. Moreover, in today's world, truth-telling plays a critical role not only regarding historical events that occurred openly before everyone's eyes but also in numerous cases where the public has a right to know what really happened—access to unmanipulated factual information (Sarı, 2018, p.150).

Moreover, once we acknowledge that factual truths not only provide the epistemic foundation for political thought but are themselves political, expecting those who present these truths to the public—the truth-tellers—not to occupy a political position seems contradictory. Historically, all truth-tellers, even if they were not part of the prevailing political struggles in society, have occupied a political position. In this respect, Homer's choice to remain outside both sides, commemorating the actions of the Achaeans as well as the Trojans and recounting the heroism of both at least as much as that of his own people, is itself political. The Athenians, who judged their wisest citizen, Socrates, on the grounds that "his teaching was destructive, led the youth astray, and confused the citizens," were the perpetrators of the death sentence in what is arguably the first political trial known to history. And although Socrates states in his *Apology* (Socrates, 2008: -31d/31e-74) that he would have already been dead had he "engaged in politics," his "maieutic" method—based on tirelessly questioning, challenging, and revising all accepted teachings and rules—was of course political (Arendt, 2023, p.18). Likewise, drawing from Arendt's own life, as she herself noted, her famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which "offered a fact-based account" of the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 2018b, p.20), sought to demonstrate "neutrality" but ultimately reflected a political stance that led to significant political debates and had highly political consequences.

Conclusion

"Post-truth democracy (...) will no longer be a democracy," writes Habermas (2008, p.143). Indeed, post-truth is not only an attack on the deliberative processes of democratic discourse but also on the very foundations that legitimize democratic procedures. In the post-truth era, different ideas and proposals do not compete within a democratic discourse; rather, democratic discourse itself is competing with non-democratic alternatives. Moreover, in a historical context where the common world is increasingly fragmented and lost, mass culture distances individuals from political institutions and politicians as they observe that satisfactory solutions to issues affecting their lives are not produced, fostering a profound sense of distrust. Yet, for democratic governance to persist, it is essential that all citizens acquire the ability to distinguish between true and false information and aim not only to represent the interests of a particular group but also to adopt others' perspectives and strive for intersubjective understanding. Without a regulative ideal for justifying democratic norms that are equally acceptable to everyone, all that remains is retreating into the echo chambers of our own peer groups. This ultimately leads to our isolation from one another, living together like monads, and prevents the formation of an integrated and stable society.

Arendt's political theory leaves us with the insight that escaping from the public sphere and politics does not solve our problems. On the contrary, we need to create spaces within the democratic political network where thinking, speaking, and acting are visible and can interact with one another, fostering the development of our faculty of judgment. Sensitivity to rhetoric, manipulation, and lies—which lie hidden within democracies based on public consent—is only possible in this way. Arendt places great importance on the political community and democratic citizens in defending factual truths and opposing organized lies. Indeed, as Arendt notes, "factual truths," which are "powerless" in the face of the "disruptive effects of interests and power," and their defense can only become a primary political factor wherever the political community engages in organized lying, not merely in isolated cases but as a principle (Arendt, 2014, p.302). Democratic citizens care about the world, and therefore they care about truth. In this sense, caring about the world and caring about truth prevent us from turning our backs on politics in the way that the philosopher turns away from the affairs of the Polis. Although Plato arrived at the most anti-Socratic conclusion from Socrates' philosophy—the idea that truth and opinion are opposed, leading to the undervaluation or even danger of the plurality of opinions—he ultimately found himself engaged in the futile effort of making an autocratic ruler a philosopher-king. Yet, given Plato's awareness of what he experienced and his critical reflection, he should hardly be considered "guilty" compared to those who fall into the same trap. The contemporary examples of philosophers retreating from the Agora to the "protected" academic world, only to become complicit in autocracy, call for a global reassessment of universities and the university system today. It is no coincidence that universities, the judiciary, and the media—so to speak, the guardians of the faculty of judgment—have become targets of autocratic powers, with intense efforts aimed at paralyzing their function as "parrhesiastes." Therefore, the institutions that Arendt highlights as truth-tellers in democratic governance must be protected, and their roles must be repeatedly reaffirmed. As Timothy Snyder writes in his book *On Tyranny*: "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights." (Snyder, 2017, p.65). Thus, the subject of democracy—the citizen—must staunchly defend their faculty of judgment. Distinguishing truth from fiction is a form of resistance, and the faculty of judgment is a point of support against totalitarian and authoritarian domination.

On the other hand, although political action and will are capable of repeatedly redefining the boundaries of laws, politics becomes impossible without these boundaries. Thus, despite its grandeur, the political sphere is limited by laws. The preservation of the common world, which makes political speech and action possible, depends on these legal (constitutional) boundaries and stable political institutions. According to Arendt, while lawmaking is not itself a political act, laws constitute the walls that define the limits within which political action can occur. As facts among humans and at the human level, laws are agreements that people reach among themselves through their consent. Therefore, it is important that people, through their own will, establish limits that protect against the unpredictability and unforeseeable nature inherent in action. While political speech and action play a role in repeatedly redefining these boundaries according to changing social conditions, legal limits prevent action from erasing politics, thereby guaranteeing the existence of a lasting common world. Thus, escaping either of these—limiting political action through laws or expanding the boundaries of laws through political action—does not seem possible; ignoring one or the other appears to lead to the same outcome: the impossibility of politics. At the same time, while acknowledging the importance of laws and constitutions, it must not be forgotten that their primary safeguard lies in the citizens who continually exercise their will to protect them. Indeed, the risks inherent in action can only be mitigated when people uphold the existence of others, the reality of plurality, and unite on a shared political-ethical ground to preserve and develop the common world. As Margaret Canovan has noted, Hannah Arendt remains unique among twentieth-century thinkers—and continues to be so in this century—by simultaneously exalting humanity's capacity to initiate new beginnings and revolutionary starts while emphasizing the importance of preserving what is valuable in political life, caring for relationships, and safeguarding institutions (Canovan, 1997, pp.11–32).

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Democracy in the Post-Truth Era: Populism and Polarization in Light of Rising Truth Hegemonies

Abstract

In the post-truth era, knowledge has not only been subjected to a crisis of truth versus falsehood but has also been drawn into a profound crisis of representation, legitimacy, and authority. This study conceptualizes the crisis of truth not merely as an epistemological breakdown but as a political, social, and symbolic process of disintegration. The transformation that became visible with the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 is closely tied to the erosion of traditional epistemic authorities and the inability to construct hegemonic narratives in the public sphere, largely driven by digitalization. With Web 2.0 technologies enabling non-elite actors to participate in discourse production, epistemic pluralism has increased—yet so have polarization, the rise of populism, and a deepening crisis of representation. This study draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory, Laclau's concept of floating signifiers, and Nietzsche's idea of ressentiment to argue that today's struggles over knowledge are in fact conflicts over regimes of meaning. The post-truth narrative, often labeled as irrational, manipulative, and anti-democratic, is interpreted here as a means of suppressing legitimate objections to dominant structures of representation. Accordingly, the struggle for truth is not only about accessing accurate information but also a political demand for representation, recognition, and the right to speak. Populist movements, by giving voice to excluded emotions and groups who feel unrepresented, have emerged as significant actors in this struggle. Yet these demands are frequently delegitimized under the labels of "irrationality" or "post-truth," further deepening polarization. Through the lens of Habermas's theory of communicative action and public sphere, the study emphasizes the importance of expressing not only claims to truth but also lifeworlds, emotions, and collective narratives within an inclusive public space in democratic societies. Ultimately, this paper does not interpret the post-truth era as a time when truth has disappeared, but rather as a period in which struggles over the ownership, definition, and authority of truth have intensified. Using the tools of critical theory, it offers a multi-layered analysis of this complex and deeply political crisis.

Keywords

Post-truth, Truth Hegemonies, Crisis of Representation, Symbolic Worlds, Populism and Polarization

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Introduction

In the “post-truth” era, the assertion that democracy is facing a profound epistemological crisis is at the center of both academic and public discourse. In this context, narratives about the increasing irrelevance of truth and humanity's ontological collapse have gained widespread traction. The concept of “post-truth” came to prominence in 2016 and has since been the subject of numerous explanations and interpretations. With the Oxford Dictionary selecting “post-truth” as its word of the year for 2016, the most frequently referenced definition has been: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in forming public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Word of the year, 2016). In this context, the Brexit referendum held in the United Kingdom in June 2016 and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November of the same year have become the focal points of “post-truth” discussions.

One of the main reasons for these developments is the transformation of the media. Traditional mainstream media presented information to the public through newspapers, books, magazines, radio, and television; during this process, content was prepared for publication through editorial control mechanisms. This process largely prevented distorted content, disinformation, and fake news from reaching the public. However, with the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies in the early 21st century, the way we access information underwent a radical change. Although the spread of the internet and social media initially gave rise to optimistic expectations that information would become more democratic, over time, individuals without sufficient equipment and ethical responsibility have become actors who produce and disseminate information through these tools, bringing new problems with them (Alpay, 2022, p.42).

The problems are a general concept used to describe the circulation of false, misleading, or harmful information in today's digital information ecosystem. Although there are different definitions in the literature, the most used distinction in determining the conceptual framework of these discussions is disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. According to this distinction, disinformation refers to the act of deliberately spreading misleading information and is often associated with fake news, conspiracy theories, or manipulative content. Misinformation refers to the unintentional sharing of information that is believed to be true and often results in the unintended spread of inaccurate information. Malinformation, on the other hand, refers to the dissemination of information with the deliberate intent to cause harm—for example, through the disclosure of personal information, invasion of privacy, or content that contains insults. These conceptual distinctions are critical for understanding the intent and motivation of the person or institution disseminating the information. They also provide a functional framework for analyzing the conditions under which information irregularities become more visible and for shaping strategies to combat them (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp.9–15).

Although this new media environment offers advantages such as speed and ease of access, problems such as disinformation, information pollution, and unethical publishing have also deepened with the circulation of content that lacks editorial filtering. According to Sunstein (2007, pp. 46-96), disinformation, false news, and manipulative content not only shape individual perceptions but also increase social polarization and negatively affect people's decision-making processes, thereby undermining democratic functioning. In this context, the blurring of boundaries between truth and

perception in the contemporary era, where social media has become increasingly influential, poses a serious threat to democratic processes. On the other hand, with the consolidation of neoliberal policies in the 1990s, an increasing interdependence between the media, politics, and capital has been observed. This transformation has weakened the central position of journalists, who are responsible for processing truth in the public interest, in democratic processes. Journalistic ideals have been increasingly pushed into the background in traditional mainstream media; in contrast, alternative media spaces have risen, and this structure, which appears to be more pluralistic, has paradoxically fed polarization and caused further fragmentation in the information universe of news consumers. This process has deepened social polarization and paved the way for new social divisions to emerge through media consumption (Koçer, 2025, pp.8-10).

However, these narratives fail to adequately consider a certain important dimension. Indeed, we are currently experiencing a crisis of truth; however, this crisis is not merely about access to information or the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In fact, at the root of the crisis lies the dissolution of the "truth" regime that has been constructed within the framework of power relations and shaped by dominant elite groups for years. The authorities of knowledge on which modern regimes of representation are based are no longer able to construct hegemonic narratives in the public sphere as they once did; they are losing the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the discourses they create. In this context, rising truth hegemonies cause epistemological crises and bring with them debates about populism and polarization. This study examines how information disorder interacts with social polarization and populism, the effects of these phenomena on democratic processes, and how these processes are shaped. Throughout history, such conflicts have always been seen, and the parties have eventually reached a compromise. In this regard, the study examines the formation process and causes of the conflict and proposes methods for establishing a meaningful and constructive dialogue between opposing views considering Habermas.

The Rise of Truth Hegemonies

Today, the authorities of knowledge on which modern regimes of representation, historically decisive for the production and circulation of knowledge, are based are no longer able to construct hegemonic narratives in the public sphere as effectively as before; the discourses produced by these authorities are increasingly losing their legitimacy and social inclusiveness. In this context, the breakdown in the production of consent has paved the way for the rise of alternative information regimes and narratives. However, these alternative discourses are often excluded with normatively negative concepts such as "post-truth" or "populism" and positioned outside the rational discourse framework. Thus, actors who question or position themselves outside the current dominant information regime are presented as irrational, manipulative, or a threat to the democratic order. Yet what is at stake is not merely an illusion about knowledge; it is also a social protest against mechanisms of representation, authority, and legitimacy. Therefore, today's "post-truth" debates should be evaluated not only as a crisis of truth but also within the framework of the dissolution of dominant knowledge orders and the forms of resistance to this dissolution. In this context, thinking about epistemic pluralism and alternative forms of representation seems essential for the democratic reconstruction of truth.

The elite's understanding of representation and the hegemonic order they have built around this understanding have historically been based on a powerful epistemic corpus and canonical structure. The printing press, newspapers, television, radio, and other traditional mass media have played a

decisive role in consolidating this hegemony. These tools have enabled elite actors to present their symbolic world as "truth" and legitimize this narrative on the social plane. On the other hand, non-elite social groups—or anti-elites¹—have long been deprived of the capacity to produce an alternative narrative to this hegemonic discourse or to bring it into the public sphere. Consequently, they have been compelled to accept the dominant discourse unquestioningly and to demonstrate an involuntary consent to it.

However, with the digitalization process, particularly the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 technologies, this one-way communication model has been transformed. In contrast to the centralized structure of traditional media tools, digital platforms have shifted discourse production to a horizontal plane, thereby granting non-elite actors the opportunity to construct and circulate their own narratives. This development has shaken the epistemic authority of elite actors who have long held a monopoly over the production and legitimization of knowledge, leading to the emergence of a pluralistic structure in the discourse field. This transformation plays a decisive role not only at the level of knowledge and narrative production but also in the construction of social identities and the deepening of political polarization. Anti-elite actors view the exclusion and lack of representation they have historically experienced as an opportunity to find a voice in digital media; in this context, they are challenging the institutions and representative structures of the elite with resentment. This situation makes it difficult for the existing public sphere to find common ground and, parallel to the fragmentation of the regime of truth, gives rise to a new polarization dynamic.

A Look at Information Hegemonies Considering Critical Theory

The concept of criticism carries various meanings in different disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and art. However, when combined with theory, "criticism" goes beyond mere evaluation or interpretation; it assigns itself a historical and political mission, almost a sacred duty. This duty is often directed at questioning power. This is because critical thinking acts with the awareness that power exists not only in certain institutions but everywhere and in everything. This study will evaluate the principle of the ubiquity of power by limiting it through its relationship with knowledge. Critical theory addresses an issue not only as an intellectual but also as a political issue. In this sense, it transcends the boundaries of academic disciplines and becomes one of the tools of social transformation. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, humans cannot completely escape the influence of the era in which they live; therefore, their intellectual efforts are intertwined with the political and cultural structures of the time. Gramsci's understanding of objectivity, which he defines as "universal subjectivity," emphasizes that knowledge production is always embedded in specific historical and ideological contexts (Gramsci, 1971, pp.1424-1425).

In this context, hegemony relies not only on overt coercion but also on ideological leadership. Hegemonic power gains social approval by presenting its worldview as a universal interest. According to Gramsci's theory, hegemony in industrial societies can only be established by classes that play a central role in the production process. Economic power here encompasses not only the possession of material resources but also moral and cultural leadership. This leadership is realized through organic

¹Anti-elites or non-elite social groups are segments of society that lack canonical knowledge and established epistemic frameworks, and are unable to challenge existing values and discourses due to their lack of access to mass media. They are excluded from political and cultural representation.

intellectuals. The production of knowledge, the construction of value systems, and the universalization of these values are the cornerstones of hegemonic domination.

In this context, Horkheimer's article "Traditional and Critical Theory" defends an approach that aims to transform social realities, as opposed to traditional theories that merely explain existing realities. While traditional theory focuses on objectively explaining the status quo—especially the symbolic world of the elite—critical theory aims at liberation by considering the social context. In this context, critical theory seeks to make visible the conditions that deprive individuals of the power to construct their own futures by analyzing distorted forms of communication and structures of domination reproduced in social relations. Critical theory does not merely question what, how, and why things happen; it also investigates for whom, at what cost, and through which methods these realities are maintained. In this way, it reveals the two-way relationship between knowledge and power and aims to create the intellectual and political groundwork for the possibility of liberation (Horkheimer, 2005, pp.339-388).

The way the concept of "truth" is approached in "post-truth" discourse parallels traditional scientific approaches. "Post-truth" critics often tend to view facts as objective and absolute elements of truth, independent of context and interpretation. In the discourse of the "post-truth" era, attention is drawn to the fact that Enlightenment methodologies—especially the scientific method—are accepted as an almost undisputed authority in the resolution of political and social problems. In this context, the efforts of "post-truth" theorists to explain social and political crises with empirically verifiable facts demonstrate that they reproduce the epistemological limits of traditional theory. The assumption that reality can only be constructed through scientific means and that the knowledge obtained through these means is identical to "truth itself" emerges as the common ground of both "post-truth" theory and traditional positivist thought (Howlett, 2022, pp.196-199).

In this context, contemporary debates about "truth" are not limited to the weakness of individuals' capacity to access accurate information. The real crisis is the dissolution of *truth regimes* that have been shaped by dominant elite groups for years and are intertwined with power relations. This dissolution stems from the loss of legitimacy of modern knowledge authorities and their inability to construct a hegemonic discourse in the public sphere. Narratives presented as "true information" no longer carry a claim to inclusivity and universality that can convince large segments of society. This rupture is not only epistemological but also heralds political and social transformation.

The "post-truth" era is often interpreted as a deviation or manipulation of information. However, this approach reduces the issue to a simplistic level. In reality, "post-truth" is not merely an era where the boundaries between truth and falsehood have blurred, but also a historical juncture where *hegemonic knowledge regimes* are facing a crisis of legitimacy. The authority of dominant elite groups in the production of discourse is being questioned; the established order of knowledge, representation, and legitimacy is facing serious social opposition. This opposition is not merely a rejection of truth, but of *a singular understanding of truth*. Today, the rise of alternative regimes of knowledge can also be read as forms of resistance against the fragmentation of hegemonic knowledge authorities. However, these alternative discourses are often coded as *irrational*, *manipulative*, or *a threat to democracy* and marginalized with the label "post-truth." Thus, control over knowledge production is being

reestablished. Yet this process is a moment of transition in which representation, authority, and legitimacy are being redefined.

Therefore, the crisis we are experiencing today is not so much the loss of *truth* as the dissolution of *the hegemony established over truth*. This dissolution is an expression of the long-term ideological struggle that Gramsci called the "war of position." The effort to establish hegemony by winning hearts and minds is no longer as easy as it used to be. In this period, where alternatives are emerging and rapidly changing, establishing hegemony over knowledge and discourse has become quite difficult. This necessitates the development of new strategies for both dominant actors and oppositional subjects (Okur & Ongur, 2019, pp.291-322).

To rebuild truth on a democratic foundation, it is inevitable to make room for epistemic pluralism and alternative forms of representation. At this point, critical thinking does not merely expose power; it also calls for the democratization of knowledge production processes. For it is not the appropriation of truth, but its constant questioning, debate, and reconstruction that constitute the most fundamental step toward liberation. Otherwise, imposing one's own symbolic form and world of meaning as social truth leads to polarization and the widening of the gap between the parties.

The Epistemological and Different World Dimension of Polarization and Populism Debates

In the "post-truth" context, the production of knowledge cannot be explained solely based on the opposition between right and wrong; rather, it points to a field shaped by epistemological plurality, where competing regimes of knowledge struggle against each other. This situation often does not signify the "collapse of truth," but rather a "truth inflation" and, at the same time, a "loss of authority." Reality is no longer a unified structure defined by a central authority; it has become a field shaped by the strategic interventions of different actors and a stage for the competition of multiple representations. "Post-truth" essentially refers to a socio-political context characterized by a lack of honesty, distrust, and false and fake information; this context points to a crisis of legitimacy for traditional knowledge authorities that play an arbitral role in the public sphere. In this crisis environment, where the authority vacuum has deepened, the public discourse arena is divided between competing regimes of truth and the actors representing these regimes. The lack of communication and negotiation between these actors weakens social cohesion in liberal democracies and makes political polarization almost inevitable.

From an epistemological perspective, it is possible to understand the political atmosphere in the United States in a more balanced and holistic manner. Looking at the period from the 1930s to the late 1970s, the political arena was predominantly shaped by liberal tendencies. This dominance was particularly evident in the Democratic Party's long-standing institutional superiority in Congress. During the same period, the cultural sphere also witnessed a similar monocracy. National media outlets and major television channels largely served as vehicles for this liberal consensus. Many forms of production, from high culture to popular culture—novels, films, television series, and entertainment content—clearly reflected a liberal worldview. During this period, there were few areas where conservative figures gained significant visibility in the public sphere. Since the media, academia, and other cultural institutions were largely aligned with liberal discourse, conservatives criticized the ideological uniformity of these institutions; however, these criticisms were largely ignored because they were considered marginal (Friedman, 2023, p. 7). Groups positioned as marginal

in the social and political spheres were excluded from public representation and denied a voice. However, once they gained access to spaces of expression and were able to circulate their own symbolic worlds, the narratives and discourses of these groups were frequently devalued as "post-truth" or populist discourses and excluded from the realm of legitimacy. From the perspective of conservatives, an internal, internally consistent but largely closed information universe has emerged, in which an alternative perception of reality is constantly reproduced. This universe not only offers a different perspective but also makes meaningful and constructive dialogue with opposing views almost impossible. The knowledge-based polarization that has emerged between the two sides has reached such a point that neither group can believe that the other truly rejects what they see as obvious truths. This situation has created an echo chamber of mutual accusations and increasingly loud voices. Ultimately, information-based polarization has become largely entrenched, with both sides retreating into their own epistemic bubbles and finding it increasingly difficult to comprehend the intellectual premises of the other side. This situation is not limited to the political arena; it has spread to various areas of everyday life, such as climate change, pandemic policies, clothing habits, and cultural content consumption, making almost every issue susceptible to polarization along political lines (Friedman, 2023, pp.12-14).

Alternative information regimes or perceptions of reality are often devalued and marginalized under categories such as "post-truth," populism, or fake narratives, rather than being treated as different perspectives and opened to negotiation. Such discourses not only serve to reproduce the existing status quo but also prevent different narratives of knowledge from finding a place in the public sphere. As a result, the public debate arena is increasingly turning into closed information universes where mutual accusations and epistemic exclusion intensify; knowledge-based polarization deepens, and the parties find it increasingly difficult to understand the intellectual premises of opposing views. Thus, both sides close themselves off within their own epistemic bubbles, further hindering the construction of a pluralistic and negotiation-based public sphere.

A significant portion of academic studies on misleading information in the digital age revolves around questions of how and why such content is produced, disseminated, and legitimized at the societal level. The literature frequently emphasizes that digital media provides a conducive environment for information distortion processes, such as disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. Within this framework, determining the boundaries between true and false information emerges as a fundamental analytical issue, which is conceptualized through typologies based on the intent and accuracy of content. However, this approach often neglects the broader and more complex social context. As Farkas and Schou (2018, pp.299–300) point out, rather than treating the categories of "truth" and "falsehood" as objectively determinable truths with fixed boundaries, these concepts should be understood as part of ongoing political struggles over what is considered legitimate and what is considered deceptive. From this perspective, "fake news" should not be seen merely as a technical problem related to information, but also as a discursive signifier functioning in the arena of political discourse. In this context, studies focusing on how the concept of "fake news" is defined in different contexts and how these definitions relate to the production of social reality reveal that the issue cannot be reduced to the accuracy of information. Rather than providing a universal and fixed definition of fake news, such approaches analyze how the meanings attributed to this concept are produced and contested at the discursive, political, and social levels.

Farkas and Schou argue that the concept of "fake news" does not have a fixed and universal meaning but rather takes on a flexible discursive structure that is redefined by different political actors in various contexts. According to them, this concept has become a "floating signifier," as Laclau puts it; that is, it is a term loaded with different meanings that plays a functional role in the construction of political identities, exclusionary boundaries, and social antagonisms. In this context, "fake news" is no longer just a technical concept referring to misinformation but has become a powerful political tool used to delegitimize political opponents, wage legitimacy struggles, and establish hegemony. Therefore, the discourse of "fake news" is regarded as a discursive figure inherent in broader hegemonic conflicts over how social reality is produced, occupying a central position in contemporary political struggles (Farkas & Schou, 2018, p.302).

Within this theoretical framework, Laclau's concept of *the floating* signifier describes signs that emerge in specific historical contexts and are appropriated and given meaning by different, even opposing, hegemonic projects. When a signifier is simultaneously filled by different discursive fields, it becomes the object of a struggle for meaning. This struggle is not merely a matter of linguistic difference but also part of a broader political conflict over the framework within which social reality is constructed. According to Laclau (*On Populist Reason*, 2007, p. 151), shifting signifiers come to the fore especially during periods of "organic crisis"; that is, in historical moments when the existing symbolic order and established networks of meaning are radically questioned and attempted to be reconstructed. During these periods, social meanings become more explicit and a terrain more susceptible to hegemonic interventions emerges. Thus, Laclau's work offers both a radical theoretical opening on the nature of meaning and an in-depth analysis of how these meanings are transformed into hegemonic tools. Shifting signifiers are at the very center of these hegemonic struggles; they serve as a key conceptual tool for understanding how social reality is constructed, who imposes which meanings, and how these processes produce political outcomes.

The main issue is who has the power to define truth, who can accurately represent social reality, and through which means this is achieved. In this context, any intervention aimed at reshaping existing symbolic systems is not merely a communicative crisis but also an attempt to dismantle an existing hegemony and replace it with a new one. Therefore, if structures that previously produced meaning are losing their credibility, we may indeed be in a period of organic crisis. However, this does not mean that truth no longer matters; on the contrary, it shows that struggles over what truth is have moved to the very center of the social arena. This leads us not so much to an age in which "truths have become worthless" as to an "hyperfactual" era in which the boundaries between reality and fiction are intensely debated (Farkas & Schou, 2018, pp.308-309).

However, such superficial solutions cannot be expected to eliminate epistemic polarization, as this polarization did not arise solely because of extreme and provocative discourse. We are faced with a deeper and systematically reproduced issue: the anti-epistemological assumptions that legitimize such discourse in the minds of partisans. These assumptions cannot be easily eliminated by individual will, as they are shaped by the cognitive structures formed by the information, interpretations, and meaning frameworks to which everyone is exposed throughout their life. When people accuse those with opposing views of lying, being self-serving, or spreading misinformation, they often sincerely believe their claims. This is because the flow of information they are exposed to leads them to believe that the "truths" they have adopted are so clear and indispensable that it seems almost impossible for

any rational person to disagree with them. Therefore, someone who expresses a contrary opinion is either considered to be deliberately distorting the truth or to have an irrational mindset. This kind of *naïve realism*, as Friedman points out, feeds not only intellectual but also moral polarization; because the other side is positioned not merely as someone who thinks wrongly, but as an element that directly threatens the truth and, therefore, public virtue. Under these conditions, making room for values such as politeness, dialogue, or understanding becomes nearly impossible (Friedman, 2023, p.14).

Symbolic Worlds and the Way We Make Sense of the World

People understand the world not only through objective realities but also through meaning, representation, and symbolic orders. Jacques Lacan's concept of the "symbolic order" (*ordre symbolique*) argues that the subject is shaped within social, cultural, and linguistic structures. According to Lacan, although the subject is structured by unconscious desires, the place where these desires are expressed is the symbolic order; that is, the normative structure of language and culture. The subject's understanding of the world always occurs through this pre-structured symbolic system. Thus, reality is shaped by collective meaning-making processes beyond individual perception. This situation shows that "truth" is also a socially constructed concept; that is, it is never simple, direct, or universal (Fink, 1995, p. 25). Similarly, Jacques Derrida's concept of "*différance*" argues that meaning is not fixed and final; every meaning is established by deferring to and referring to another meaning. This approach renders the fixity of meaning impossible and leads us to the idea that "truth" is always constructed in relation to a context, discourse, and historical conjuncture. As Derrida demonstrates with his method of deconstruction, it is impossible for any discourse to produce absolute meaning; every discourse operates through its own internal contradictions and exclusions. Therefore, truth is not a unified and monolithic structure; it is always fragmented, fragile, and open to struggle (Derrida, 2014, pp.43-114).

Thus, the struggle for truth we witness today is not merely a crisis of factual knowledge; it is also a profound symbolic conflict over how we make sense of the world, whose world of meaning will be accepted as valid, and who will have the right to represent it. The discourses of truth produced by different subjective positions within their own symbolic universes are no longer compelled to submit to the truth regime of a central authority. However, this plurality also creates fertile ground for demagogues to manipulate the masses, so that the symbolic universes to which individuals feel they belong can become the founding myth of authoritarian-populist regimes. Populist actors turn the uncertainty arising from these symbolic fractures into an opportunity, claiming to offer the masses a unique universe of meaning belonging to the "real people." Sometimes this universe of meaning is constructed around *floating signifiers* such as nation, religion, culture, or tradition, and hegemonic discourses are established by assigning absolute meanings to these concepts. However, these discourses obscure the multi-layered nature of truth and weaken the foundations of pluralistic democracy. The main problem here is the narrowing of the symbolic representation field and the coding of alternative regimes of meaning as "false," "enemy," "dangerous," and "other."

It is evident that "post-truth" theorists do not make a meaningful effort to reconstruct individuals' epistemic frameworks and belief systems. Explanations based on external factors such as social media, algorithms, lack of fact-checking, and digitalization fall short of answering questions about how individuals perceive the world and why they hold certain beliefs. This approach is similar to the

attempt to explain human behavior using the principles of causality and observation in the natural sciences; individuals' epistemic failures are explained by reducing them to observable external conditions. However, this reductionist attitude ignores the fact that humans are social and historical subjects.

As Raymond Geuss emphasizes in his work *Critical Theory*, understanding how an individual perceives the world and what types of arguments they find persuasive is only possible through meaningful interaction with them, not through external analysis alone. Geuss states: "If one wants to discover how agents see the world and what they find persuasive in a debate, one must engage with them and enter into their way of life" (Geuss, 2002, p. 138). This approach prioritizes an intrinsic understanding of individuals' epistemic frameworks and worlds of meaning. However, in "post-truth" debates, the perceptual and epistemic principles of these individuals are often systematically externalized; they are represented as "misled," "irrational," or "truth-denying" subjects. This feeds a reductive descriptive approach rather than a critical analysis.

The "post-truth" theory often reflects a nostalgic reaction to the loss of the liberal status quo, which is assumed to have been disrupted. In this context, the "denial of facts" is not merely an epistemological issue, but also the dissolution of a specific political and ideological order. However, this dissolution cannot be remedied solely through technical means—such as fact-checking, information literacy, or algorithmic regulation. For the reason for the current fragmentation is not merely the spread of misinformation, but the radical transformation of the meaning worlds of social subjects. In this context, Howlett's fundamental claim is that the "post-truth" theory requires a more in-depth sociological and cultural analysis in order to understand the epistemic collapse it seeks to critique. Explaining individuals' belief systems solely through misinformation or emotional narratives risks overlooking the structural and subjective motivations behind these systems (Howlett, 2022, pp. 201-205).

The exclusion experienced by social actors who are excluded from public representation or marginalized by the hegemonic knowledge regime is not limited to material or institutional deprivation. Over time, this exclusion accumulates and transforms into a response that can be called "resentment" on the emotional and symbolic levels. Resentment here is not merely an individual emotion; it is the distilled form of historically suppressed, unrepresented, or devalued collective experiences. When evaluated in the context of political psychology and critical social theory, resentment arises from the failure of the demand for recognition to be met, the exclusion of the search for legitimacy, and the perpetuation of the condition of not being accepted as a subject. According to Nietzsche's definition, resentment is a form of emotional withdrawal and internalization resulting from the inability of the powerless to take direct action against the powerful. Within this framework, the emotional burden carried by anti-elite groups in today's political atmosphere—that is, broad social segments that feel unrepresented, unheard, or undervalued—is reflected in the political arena in the form of resentment. This resentment is not merely a form of anger; it is also a symbolic desire for revenge directed against the existing system of representation, the order of knowledge, and hegemonic narratives (Nietzsche, 2022, pp.41–71).

Groups deprived of political representation have been rendered invisible for a long time by traditional media, academia, and political elites. However, the opportunities for expression that have emerged

with digitalization have both made this suppressed resentment expressible and shaped it within a specific collective discourse. In this sense, social media platforms are not merely a space for communication but also serve as a "emotional outlet" and a space for reinterpretation. These new platforms enable the symbolic reproduction of long-suppressed anger, disappointment, and feelings of exclusion.

However, the discourses that emerge during this process are mostly dismissed as "populism," "post-truth," or "fake news" and epistemically excluded. This exclusion is not merely a debate about knowledge; it is also a manifestation of a power relationship that determines which emotions, narratives, and subjects can gain public legitimacy. The discourses labeled as "post-truth" are rooted in a much deeper crisis of representation. Resentment, because of epistemic exclusion, seeks to create alternative regimes of truth and symbolically "displace" the existing order. In this context, resentment is not merely an irrational reaction; it is a form of political subjectivation shaped by the suppression of demands for representation, recognition, and legitimacy. On the political plane, resentment sharpens the distinction between "us" and "them" and establishes a new claim to truth based on this distinction. However, this claim to truth is often positioned outside the realm of rational discourse because it contradicts liberal-democratic norms or academic-elite knowledge structures. Thus, the epistemic demands arising from the crisis of representation are systematically suppressed. The current hegemonic knowledge order perceives the rise of these demands as an epistemic threat and therefore codes them as "irrational," "emotional," "manipulative," or "extremist." However, what is at stake is not merely a conflict over knowledge; it is also a struggle over representation based on emotions, experiences, and historical exclusion. Resentment is the driving force that carries the emotional weight of this struggle, and the rise of many populist movements today is precisely related to the transfer of this emotional residue to the political sphere. From this perspective, the crises related to knowledge production in the "post-truth" era are not merely epistemological; they are also ethical, political, and representational crises. Resentment should be understood as both a result and a driving force of this multi-layered crisis. The state of not being represented is not merely an absence; it is also a demand to produce narratives, to take the stage, and to be seen. When this demand is not met, destructive polarization emerges on the political and cultural planes. Resentment is the carrier of this destructiveness; but it can also be a harbinger of an alternative vision of representation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In the "post-truth" era, we are living in a period where truth has become insignificant and emotions and personal beliefs have taken precedence over objective facts in shaping public opinion. The 2016 Brexit referendum and Trump's election have been symbolic turning points in this process. At the root of these developments lies the transformation of the media structure. Traditional control mechanisms have been replaced by digital platforms where everyone becomes a content producer with Web 2.0. This situation has increased information disorder and given rise to new epistemic threats in the form of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. The proliferation of misleading and manipulative content deeply affects not only individual perceptions but also social polarization and democratic processes.

However, these narratives overlook an important dimension. The crisis of truth we are experiencing is not merely a problem of access to information or distinguishing between truth and falsehood. At the root of the crisis lies the dissolution of the "truth" regime that has been shaped by power relations

and controlled by the ruling elite for many years. The information authorities on which modern regimes of representation are based are no longer able to construct hegemonic narratives in the public sphere; the legitimacy and inclusiveness of their discourse is weakening. Thus, the rise of different truth hegemonies not only deepens epistemological crises but also brings with it political problems such as populism and social polarization.

Today, the knowledge authorities that form the basis of modern regimes of representation are unable to construct hegemonic narratives that are as effective as they once were in the public sphere. This situation weakens the legitimacy of dominant knowledge regimes and paves the way for the rise of alternative knowledge orders. However, these alternative narratives are often dismissed with negative concepts such as "post-truth" and "populism" and positioned outside rational and democratic discourse. Yet what we are experiencing is not merely a problem related to information; it is a social protest against mechanisms of representation, authority, and legitimacy. Digitalization and Web 2.0 technologies have increased epistemic pluralism by enabling non-elite actors to create and disseminate their own narratives. This transformation affects both knowledge production and political identities, deepening social polarization and making it difficult to construct a common public sphere. Thus, today's crisis of truth is not only epistemological but also a process of dissolution with political and social dimensions.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony emphasizes that knowledge production and value systems are shaped within power relations. In this context, hegemony is not only overt coercion but also a process of ideological leadership and social consent. Horkheimer, one of the classic representatives of critical theory, opposes traditional theories that are content with explaining knowledge and proposes an approach that aims to transform social realities. This perspective seeks opportunities for liberation by making social structures of domination and distorted forms of communication visible. Today, the frequent discussion of "post-truth" in terms of scientific knowledge and objective reality reproduces the epistemological limits of traditional theory. The real problem, however, is the dissolution of "truth" regimes shaped by the ruling elite and intertwined with power relations. This dissolution is related to the loss of legitimacy of knowledge authorities and the inability to construct hegemonic narratives in the public sphere. Therefore, the current crisis is not only epistemological but also a sign of political, social, and ideological transformation. In this context, critical theory sees it as imperative to open space for epistemic pluralism and alternative forms of representation to rebuild truth on a democratic foundation. The fundamental condition for liberation is not the appropriation of truth, but its constant questioning, discussion, and reconstruction. In this way, the complex structures of knowledge and power relations are examined, and the possibilities for social transformation are explored.

The "post-truth" era is an environment where the production of knowledge cannot be explained by the binary of true-false, but rather by the existence of different and competing regimes of knowledge and the dominance of epistemological pluralism. Reality has ceased to be a fixed structure determined by central authorities; it has transformed into multiple fields of representation shaped by the interventions of various actors. This situation leads to the questioning of the legitimacy of knowledge authorities and a vacuum of authority in the public sphere, bringing with it political polarization and the weakening of social cohesion. In the US, in particular, conservative groups have long been marginalized, but upon entering the public sphere, they have constructed their own

epistemic universe, been excluded by the mainstream, and labeled as "post-truth." This has prevented meaningful dialogue between the parties and spread polarization based on political identities to many areas of daily life. As a result, public debates have turned into echo chambers filled with mutual accusations and epistemic exclusion, while pluralistic and open platforms for discussion have gradually diminished.

Academic studies on misleading information in the digital age focus on how such content is produced, disseminated, and gains social legitimacy. The literature views digital media as an environment conducive to the spread of disinformation and misinformation. However, the distinction between true and false information often overlooks the broader political and social context. According to Farkas and Schou (2018, p.301), truth and falsehood are not fixed categories but part of ongoing political struggles. The concept of "fake news" has evolved from a technical issue into a flexible discursive tool used in political struggles, loaded with different meanings by different political actors. In this context, Ernesto Laclau's concept of the "sliding signifier" describes symbols that are subject to constant debate and hegemonic conflicts. Such periods are called "organic crises"; they are processes in which existing meanings are questioned, and attempts are made to reconstruct them. The main issue is who will define the truth and how social reality will be represented. The reshaping of existing symbolic systems is not merely a communicative crisis but also a struggle for hegemony. Truth struggles are part of a "hyper-factual" era where the boundaries between reality and fiction are intensely debated, not one where truths are devalued. In this process, epistemic polarization is deep-rooted and does not easily dissipate due to anti-epistemological assumptions. People are tightly bound to their own realities and often accuse those with opposing views of deliberately lying. This situation increases moral polarization and limits the possibilities for dialogue.

Truth is shaped by symbolic orders and meaning-making processes. Lacan's concept of the "symbolic order" and Derrida's concept of "différance" show that meaning is not fixed but constantly reconstituted in relation to historical and social contexts. Therefore, the struggle for truth goes beyond the factual knowledge crisis and is a hegemonic conflict between worlds of meaning and fields of representation. Populist actors exploit this symbolic uncertainty by claiming to offer the masses a unique and authentic world of meaning. These universes are often shaped around floating signifiers such as nation, religion, or culture, and they narrow the symbolic representation field by coding alternative meanings as "false" or "dangerous." This situation undermines the fundamental values of pluralistic democracy.

According to Raymond Geuss's critical theory, to understand how individuals perceive the world, it is necessary to enter their lifeworld and interact with them. However, post-truth theory disregards the epistemic principles of these individuals, viewing them solely as "misled" or "truth-denying" subjects. This theory reflects a nostalgic reaction to the dissolution of the liberal status quo and views the rejection of facts as a social transformation that cannot be remedied by technical solutions (truth checks, information literacy, etc.). Social exclusion is not only material or institutional but also emotional and symbolic. This exclusion transforms into an emotional response defined as collective "resentment." Resentment, as defined by Nietzsche, is the internalized anger of the powerless who cannot directly oppose the powerful. Today, broad social groups who feel unrepresented carry this resentment, which manifests as a symbolic desire for revenge against the existing system of representation and knowledge. While digitalization and social media enable the expression of this

repressed resentment and its transformation into collective discourse, the resulting discourse is devalued and epistemically excluded through labels such as "populism," "post-truth," or "fake news." This exclusion reflects a power struggle over which emotions, narratives, and subjects can gain public legitimacy. Resentment is not an irrational reaction; it is a political subjectification that emerges from the suppression of demands for representation, recognition, and legitimacy. This process deepens the distinction between "us" and "them" and produces new claims to truth. However, these claims are excluded from liberal-democratic norms. Thus, the epistemic demands of the crisis of representation are systematically suppressed. The hegemonic order of knowledge perceives these demands as a threat and codes them as "irrational" and "manipulative," but in reality, this crisis is not merely a conflict over knowledge; it is a struggle over historical exclusion and emotional representation. Resentment is the emotional driving force behind this struggle and is at the root of the rise of many populist movements. In conclusion, information crises in the "post-truth" era are not only epistemological but also ethical, political, and representational crises. Resentment is both the result and the driving force of this multi-layered crisis. The state of not being represented is also a demand for visibility and narrative production; when unmet, it leads to destructive polarization and social conflict.

The fundamental approach of critical theory is to oppose the imposition of truth by a single authority or central source of knowledge. In this context, Habermas' theory of the public sphere emphasizes the importance of creating a communication environment open to free and equal participation in democratic societies (Habermas, 2015, p.51). In the "post-truth" era, the rejection of the legitimacy of different epistemic regimes and sources of knowledge deepens the crisis of representation in society. Therefore, recognizing epistemic pluralism and constructing inclusive public spheres where different social groups can express their lifeworlds is a critical need. To preserve democratic health, it is necessary not only to ensure the objectivity of knowledge but also to enable individuals to express their lifeworlds and experiences in a dialogic environment. Thus, epistemic ruptures and social polarization can be overcome. The sharing of lifeworlds reduces othering and strengthens democratic bonds. On the other hand, feelings of resentment and exclusion, which have become fundamental components of political discourse in the "post-truth" era, reveal that critical theory must consider not only cognitive but also emotional and symbolic dimensions. The emotional experiences and recognition demand (desire to exist and approval by the other side of the self) of unrepresented groups undermine democratic legitimacy and increase social conflicts as long as they are not included in public debate processes. For these reasons, the healthy functioning of democratic societies can be achieved by creating inclusive public spaces that recognize epistemic pluralism, strengthening communicative action and dialogue, and considering emotional and symbolic demands in political communication. In this way, while the crisis of representation is overcome, democratic legitimacy and social integration are strengthened. It should not be forgotten that democracy requires a continuous process of renewal and rethinking. Insisting on stagnation within this dynamic process harms sustainable functioning.

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Ara Ege Altınman*

Surveillance Capitalism and Democratic Participation: Can Micro-Targeted Political Advertising Lead to Erosion in Advanced Democracies?

Abstract

This article explores the impact of surveillance capitalism and micro-targeted political advertising on democratic processes in advanced democracies. It argues that the business models of internet platforms (i.e Surveillance Capitalism), which commodify personal data to deliver tailored political messages, pose significant risks to democratic norms such as participation, accountability, and fair competition. By analyzing empirical evidence from recent electoral contexts; including the 2016 US presidential race and BREXIT, the study demonstrates how micro-targeting can be exploited to suppress voter turnout, particularly among independent and non-regular voters. Finally, the article proposes an experimental research design to quantitatively assess the effects of targeted ads on turnout. Concluding with considerations for regulation, it emphasizes the need for transparency and oversight to prevent tech firms profit motives from undermining democratic integrity.

Keywords

Democratic backsliding, surveillance capitalism, micro-targeted advertisements, social media, turnout, elections, BREXIT, U.SA

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"As I understand it, the argument was that Russian disinformation influenced the Romanian elections. However, I would like to offer my European friends some perspective. You may find it wrong for Russia to use social media ads to influence your elections. We certainly do. You can condemn it on the world stage. But if your democracy can be undermined by a few hundred thousand dollars worth of digital ads from a foreign country, then it wasn't very strong to begin with." - J.D. Vance, Munich Security Conference 2025

Introduction

The above quote is from remarks made by the US Vice President during a security meeting with European "allies." In his message and subsequent remarks, Vance emphasized that sanctions and regulations targeting internet companies restrict freedom of expression and that state intervention in the technology market is incompatible with democratic values. However, the structural dynamics of the business model of technology and social media platforms may reveal that viewing the issue as merely a matter of hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising and defending the unregulated actions of these companies is a dismissive or ignorant approach. This article focuses on the erosion and decline that digital technologies, developed independently of necessary state and civil society oversight and driven by free market dynamics, could cause in advanced democracies. It also examines how micro-targeted political advertising, a result of the surveillance capitalism business model, could significantly affect voter participation and undermine democratic values.

As defined by Shoshana Zuboff, surveillance capitalism refers to the collection of personal data by internet companies for profit and its commodification through micro-targeted advertising (Zuboff, 2019, p.91). This practice has raised concerns about the erosion of democratic principles such as participation, accountability, and fair competition. Political campaigns can influence voter behavior through misleading ads, thereby suppressing the participation of voters opposed to them; this could signal a regression for inclusive and fair electoral processes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). The central hypothesis of this study is that micro-targeted political advertisements containing misleading content can discourage voters from participating in elections. Additionally, it posits that such advertisements may have a more profound impact on independent voters and non-regular voters rather than partisan voters. This article argues that voter suppression through microtargeting constitutes a variant of democratic decline. When political campaigns use digital advertising to suppress the participation of specific voter groups, this weakens the integrity of democratic processes and erodes democratic norms. Empirical evidence will be examined regarding the 2016 Trump campaign and Russia's use of this method in the 2016 US elections to discourage specific voter groups from voting for Hillary Clinton. This article will theoretically explain how digital election campaigns can lead to democratic decline using micro-targeted advertising.

Literature Review

Surveillance capitalism is a useful framework for describing the business model and practices of internet companies. This article will focus on the Western model of surveillance capitalism. There are also different definitions, such as Russia's "hybrid surveillance capitalism" (Ostbo, 2021) and China's "state surveillance capitalism" (Lin & Milhaupt 2021). However, the practices of these countries are outside the scope of this study due to their political regimes. The theoretical framework of this

study—i.e., the relationship between surveillance capitalism and democratic decline—covers advanced democracies.

There are other concepts like the framework outlined by surveillance capitalism. These include "platforms" (Kreiss & McGregor 2023), "social media" (Tucker et al. 2018), "digital space" (Yarchi, Baden, and Vilenchik 2021), "cloud capital" (Varoufakis 2023), and "digital influence machine" (Nadler, Crain, & Donovan 2018) are among the concepts that draw on surveillance capitalism. In this article, I prefer the term "surveillance capitalism" because I argue that the internet's general profit model poses structural risks for democratic governance.

Surveillance capitalism can be defined as the business model of internet companies. It involves collecting individuals' personal data and then commodifying it through algorithms to sell "micro-targeted ads" to businesses based on users' unique digital experiences (Zuboff 2015). In this model, capital is used to obtain consumers' data. Zuboff refers to this as "behavioral surplus" (Zuboff, 2019, p.93). Behavioral surplus refers to users' private experiences collected not only to improve platform services or search engine optimization but also to create demographic and sociological profiles. The behavioral surplus obtained is used through algorithms—the new production mode—to analyze consumer behavior (Zuboff, 2018, pp. 96–97). Zuboff refers to this as "prediction products," which predict current and future behavior, and the ultimate product of this capitalist production mode is "micro-targeted ads" (Zuboff, 2018, p.97). Micro-targeted ads are messages created based on users' specific experiences and are the product sold by internet companies to their real customers, i.e., advertisers. To create the most accurate ads, internet companies pursue the maximum amount of behavioral surplus they can obtain (Nadler, Crain, & Donovan, 2018). We could argue that some large internet companies are actually in the business of advertising is the primary source of income for social media and most internet companies. As of 2024, approximately \$224 billion of the total revenue reported by Alphabet Inc. (the parent company of Google and YouTube) comes from advertising, accounting for approximately 80% of the total revenue (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2024). On the other hand, Meta Platforms Inc. generated nearly 98% of its total revenue from advertising in 2024 (Meta Platforms Inc., 2025). This dependence on advertising revenue dictates that internet and social media companies follow a structural business model. This model makes the accuracy of micro-targeted advertising and the production of cognitive surplus the primary motivation for companies. This dependency not only highlights the importance of data-driven marketing strategies for these organizations but also drives them to adopt more aggressive approaches regarding privacy, competition, and regulatory scrutiny in the micro-targeted advertising sector. Over the past decade, the marketing model that began by directing new parents toward affordable baby diapers and enticing users with discounted airline tickets has now extended into the political realm.

Surveillance capitalism platforms are more closely linked to politics than commonly believed. Major tech companies such as Apple, Amazon, X, Google, Meta, and Microsoft invest heavily in providing political parties with consulting services during election periods, generating revenue from this, and establishing connections with current and future political leaders (Kreiss and McGregor, 2018). The Cambridge Analytica scandal is an example of how social media can be used by a private consulting firm to interfere in the democratic process (Guardian the Cambridge Analytica Files; Slotnik, 2021). In addition, government investigations accuse social media companies of violating personal privacy

rights and data security and of failing to take appropriate measures to prevent Russia's interference in BREXIT and the 2016 US elections (US Senate Committee 2020; European Parliament Research Service 2021; House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee 2019). Meta and X's role in enabling political actors and foreign powers to exploit micro-targeting capabilities through custom audience targeting (Nadler, Crain, & Donovan, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018); There is also extensive literature on the impact of micro-targeted political advertising and its potential to manipulate voters and spread misinformation (Bennett & Gordon, 2021; Borgesius et al., 2018; Constantiou & Kallinikos, 2014; Matz, Appel, & Michal, 2020; Gorton, 2016). These studies examine the rise of digital campaigns and the use of targeted political advertising in shaping public opinion and potentially influencing political behavior. However, despite the growing literature on targeted political advertising, there is little empirical evidence on its effects on political behavior, raising doubts about the extent to which these targeted ads influence political behavior (Bennett & Gordon, 2021; Nadler, Crain, & Donovan, 2018). To date, Haenschen (2023) found in their study on the 2018 US midterm elections in Texas that Facebook ads had no significant effect on overall turnout. However, the effectiveness of these ads depends on specific issues; for example, the study found that ads related to abortion rights had a weak but significant effect in competitive districts. Endres and Kelly (2018), in their studies in Florida and Virginia, showed that young, less educated, and low-income registered voters were less likely to vote when mobilized through online tools. Hager (2019), in a study conducted during the 2016 Berlin state elections, found that micro-targeted online campaigns did not increase the overall voter turnout rate. However, the study also revealed a negative effect on a left-leaning political group, reducing the opposing party's vote share by approximately 1.4 percentage points. These studies were not analyzed in terms of suppressing voter participation. The theoretical expectation addressed in this study is that micro-targeted ads are used to prevent specific voter groups from going to the polls rather than to increase voter turnout.

In recent years, the impact of social media on democracy has also received widespread academic attention (Persily, 2017). Most studies focus on polarization arising from algorithmic curation (Chang & Yi, 2024; Bail, 2022; Barberá et al., 2018; Bail, 2018; McGregor, 2018) and the megaphone effect of platforms in spreading disinformation on a large scale (Kraft & Donovan, 2020; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Schifffrin, 2017). Disinformation is part of this puzzle, and understanding its impact on voting behavior and the resilience of democracies in general is important. However, it is difficult to distinguish disinformation created to achieve political gains. The main reason for this is that the basic business model of surveillance capitalism rewards the dissemination of misinformation. For example, in the final months of the 2016 US elections, the 20 most viral fake election stories on Facebook received more engagement than reputable news sources such as The Washington Post or The New York Times (Silverman, 2017). These contents were deliberately created to take advantage of the pay-per-click mechanism, where increased website visits translate into higher revenue for users (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021). Therefore, it is difficult to assess who is involved in spreading misinformation online and why; it could be an actor motivated by pursuing their own political agenda or ordinary Macedonian youths seeking to profit from the internet's financial infrastructure (Subramanian, 2017).

Evidence from the 2016 U.S. Elections and Democratic Decline

Although there is no direct evidence linking micro-targeting and the suppression of political participation, there is growing consensus that the business model of internet companies can

exacerbate existing social divisions and increase the level of polarization among already divided segments of society, enabling political campaigns to influence voter participation through targeted manipulative and misleading messages directed at specific groups. I argue that this is a potential cause of the erosion of qualities associated with democracy, such as "competition, accountability, and participation" (Waldner & Lust, 2018). As political campaigns become more personalized (McGregor, 2018), politicians can avoid the consequences of negative campaigns by spreading misinformation. And through this, they discourage and dissuade certain segments of society from participating in the electoral process. In other words, political campaigners may target specific groups of voters who are likely to support their opponents with manipulative and misleading messages to discourage them from voting. This practice can undermine the nature of fair competition, reduce accountability by spreading misinformation, and decrease participation, thereby diminishing the quality of democracy. This technique was allegedly a strategy employed by senior members of the 2016 Trump campaign. Brad Parscale, a senior official in the 2016 Trump campaign's digital advertising team, stated in an interview with Bloomberg reporters that digital campaign teams had focused heavily on a strategy they referred to as a "voter suppression operation." The same statement also mentioned that the data was provided by Cambridge Analytica (Green & Isenberg, 2016).

According to Parscale's statement, the digital campaign team focused on discouraging three different groups that were expected to vote for Clinton: idealistic whites, feminists, and African Americans. It is alleged that they targeted these voter groups with political messages on social media to discourage them from voting. For example, idealistic whites were persuaded not to vote by highlighting internal party opposition to Sanders that emerged through Wikileaks, while feminists were persuaded not to vote by highlighting the Monica Lewinsky scandal (Hillary Clinton's attempt to cover up the scandal as a woman who had been cheated on) (Green & Isenberg, 2016).

Despite arguments such as confessions from the digital campaign team, there is still considerable debate about the effectiveness of using such technologies to persuade or suppress voters. It is also highly possible that companies such as Cambridge Analytica or Parscale, which, along with internet companies such as Facebook and Google, have profited financially from such activities, and their managers are exaggerating their ability to suppress or persuade voters. However, the digital campaign strategy employed by the 2016 Trump campaign also parallels Russia's efforts to influence the elections. The Oxford Internet Institute, in collaboration with the Senate Intelligence Committee, conducted an analysis using data provided by social media companies (Maréchal, 2017; Shane, 2017). The findings show that Russian operations primarily aimed to polarize voters, particularly African Americans and left-leaning voters, and to discourage them from participating in the election. Activities on Facebook and Instagram highlight three distinct categories of interference: suppressing participation and encouraging election boycotts, supporting a third candidate, and conducting smear campaigns against political elites (Senate Intelligence Committee Report, 116-XX). In other words, the micro-targeted advertising capacity that makes Facebook an extremely profitable business has been exploited by an authoritarian country, creating risks that seriously threaten the quality of democracy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The basic operating principles of surveillance capitalism—tracking users' personal experiences, identifying specific target audiences, and delivering messages—provide political actors with the opportunity to strategically exploit individuals' vulnerabilities (Nadler, Crain, & Donovan, 2018).

However, whether micro-targeted political messages can actually deter voters from turning out remains an important puzzle. This question is also the core motivation behind the research proposal presented in this article. I argue that there are multiple reasons why the effect of micro-targeted political messaging on voter behaviour should be quantitatively examined. If the digital infrastructure provided by internet companies to the un, is used to mislead or dissuade certain groups of voters from voting, this could erode principles that are considered fundamental to democracy. As a result of the surveillance capitalism business model, political campaigners can use this technology to suppress the participation of certain segments of the population in elections and undermine the quality of democracy-related qualities such as inclusivity and participation. In extreme cases, certain segments of the population may become detached from the democratic process and the political system in general, leading to serious governance problems.

Understanding the effects of micro-targeted political advertising within the framework of surveillance capitalism is crucial for assessing its broader implications for democratic integrity and citizen participation. Therefore, I will briefly review the literature on democratic decline. Democratic decline refers to the process by which political institutions that protect democracy are weakened or undermined by elected officials (Bermeo, 2016). It is a gradual erosion of democracy through illegal actions (Corrales, 2020). The decline in the quality of democratic governance stems from civil politicians who attack the mechanisms that brought them to power and exploit institutions and norms, leading to gradual erosion rather than collapse (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). This is a relatively new phenomenon compared to previous democratic breakdowns. Current threats to freedoms include authoritarian leaders mobilizing a portion of their electorate to undermine the system through "democratic" methods. In other words, it is civil politicians who use the power they have gained through democratic processes subject to checks and balances to eliminate those checks and balances (Svolik, 2019), and such authoritarianism accounts for 68% of all cases of democratic decline since the 1990s (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This orientation of authoritarian-inclined actors brings new challenges. In particular, it presents new obstacles to the implementation of the principle of accountability to those in power, as the gradual and incremental nature of this process, combined with voter support, makes it difficult for the opposition to identify specific events that could mobilize the public or the judiciary to act in defense of the rule of law (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Corrales, 2020). For example, electoral irregularities on election day were once common occurrences of authoritarianism, but since the 1990s, electoral manipulation has taken on a more sophisticated form that is difficult to detect, analyze, and counter (Bermeo, 2016). Just as it is difficult to identify specific events that trigger democratic erosion, it is also difficult to define democratic decline. In general, decline can be conceptualized as the erosion of norms associated with democratic governance in a democratic context. In other words, it reflects a deterioration in the quality of democracy (Waldner and Lust, 2018). It is a gradual decline in the quality of accountability, participation, and fair competition. This conceptualization aligns with my research question. This is because I argue that the business model of Surveillance Capitalism can undermine the inherent characteristics of democracies rather than causing collapse, thereby triggering a decline in the quality of democracy.

The basic idea here is that when political campaigns use microtargeting to prevent certain groups from voting, this weakens participation, accountability, and competition, leading to democratic decline. This is not a sudden collapse, but a slow erosion of democratic norms. When campaigns use microtargeting to suppress voters who are likely to support other parties, they act contrary to the

principles of having an open and fair election process. This manipulation can harm the overall health of democratic systems. The election process is the cornerstone of any democratic system (Stokes and Manin, 1999). When the integrity of this process is undermined, particularly because of efforts to suppress voter participation through misinformation or disinformation campaigns and to undermine voters' right to vote, it is recognized in the existing literature as a form of democratic decline (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Norris, 2014).

When evaluating the Trump campaign's own statements about what they claimed to have done in the 2016 Presidential Election, or the content and target audience of Russian advertisements on Facebook, it becomes apparent that Surveillance Capitalism provides political actors with an infrastructure that could trigger democratic decline. For example, if a political campaign attempts to exert "voter pressure" on voters who would otherwise vote for their opponents by using micro-targeted ads, this could lead to erosion. This is because democracy fundamentally relies on voting processes conducted through free and fair elections; these processes aim to increase voter participation and ensure the accountability of the state. However, as noted in the literature, restricting the right to vote through regulations that make voter registration or the voting process more difficult, or disinformation campaigns that misinform voters about their rights, signal a departure from this principle (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Norris, 2014). Such threats can also hinder the healthy functioning of democratic processes and undermine the credibility of elections.

Research Proposal

The theoretical section of this article can be read considering the following hypotheses:

H1: Micro-targeted political advertising is more effective in discouraging voters from voting than in persuading them to vote for a particular party or leader.

H2: The deterrence effect of micro-targeted political ads is more effective on independent voters (those who do not feel affiliated with any party).

H3: The dissuasive effect of micro-targeted political advertisements is greater among groups that do not vote regularly than among other groups.

In this section, I would like to share my proposal for an experimental study to measure the effects of the hypotheses outlined above.

This study aims to discourage participants from voting by targeting them with micro-targeted messages designed to deter them from participating in elections. Specifically, it targets independent voters and irregular voters to discourage their participation in elections. In this context, the target population consists of voters aged 25 and above who reside in an advanced democracy, are eligible to vote, and log into Facebook regularly for at least 10 minutes on at least 5 days a week. In my study, any potential changes in participants' participation preferences will be measured, and age-based differences in the sample will be weighted in statistical analysis according to their proportions. To conduct this study, collaboration will be established with reputable survey companies such as Pew Research or YouGov, which work with large population samples. Participants will be selected using a random sampling method and invited to complete an approximately 10-minute online survey. To participate in the study, participants must regularly use Facebook and be willing to share their usernames and phone numbers. Each participant will be provided with an information and consent form stating that the survey is designed to "research your political and social experiences on

Facebook." Additionally, upon completion of the study, participants will be informed of the importance of their participation and will receive a gift card for membership to a specific publishing platform. To ensure that these ethical principles are observed and to prevent any potential negative effects, participants will be informed about the micro-targeted messages they will receive, and the purpose of these messages will be explained. Additionally, participants will be asked questions about their voting preferences during the survey process and in a follow-up survey one month later. To measure participants' political leanings, the Pew Research Center's Ideological Consistency Scale will be used to place participants on an ideological scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Participants will be randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. For the experimental group, political messages tailored to participants' political values and micro-targeted will be displayed using Meta Ads Management, utilizing participants' email addresses and phone numbers. These messages will be prepared with content focused on public policies, without reference to sensitive issues such as race, nationality, ethnic origin, gender, class, disability, age, sexuality, or religion, with the aim of negatively influencing specific groups, regardless of party or identity.

For example, an independent voter interested in environmental issues will be shown messages that could negatively influence them regarding parties that support this issue, and changes in their voting behavior will be measured. Similarly, individuals who support or oppose state intervention in the market will be exposed to negative messages that align with their values. To ensure that participants are exposed to the content, the Meta system will track how much participants are exposed to the messages and how they interact with them, thereby ensuring that the experimental group is sufficiently influenced by the messages. In a follow-up survey conducted one month later, the same questions as in the first survey will be asked, and participation preference will be re-examined. The responses from these two time periods will be compared, and differences between the experimental and control groups will be analyzed. My expectation is that the participation rates of independent voters in the experimental group will decrease significantly compared to the control group due to such micro-targeted messages. If the analysis reveals a statistically significant difference, this could provide evidence that digital political campaigners can discourage groups with opposing views from voting. This would also support my argument that the infrastructure provided by internet companies operating under surveillance capitalism could lead to erosion in advanced democracies.

Conclusion

With the advent of the second millennium, digitalization, which forms the basis of the internet and technological developments that have spread to every area of social life, can, like many inventions in the past, bring both benefits and harm, depending on how societies use this technology and define its limits. Contrary to J.D. Vance's quote at the beginning, which ignores the possibility that the internet could become a weapon that harms societies, surveillance capitalism, which operates on the logic of the free market, has structural characteristics that have the potential to conflict with the democratic methods we know. However, without fully measuring the effects of this potential, it will be difficult to outline the regulatory framework that needs to be implemented. In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the approaches of governments around the world toward regulating internet companies and their role in the digital environment.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) enacted by the European Union in 2018 was an important step in the implementation of data protection standards. This regulation has been

described as one of the most stringent legal frameworks to date. In the United States, steps reflecting a stricter regulatory stance include the Federal Trade Commission's 2019 \$5 billion fine against Facebook. This fine was imposed following an investigation into the company's data privacy practices and represented a historic penalty for privacy violations. Amid growing concerns over data privacy and national security, lawmakers from both major political parties in the US have introduced bills to ban TikTok unless its parent company, ByteDance, is sold to a foreign entity and removed from Chinese control. This move highlights the increasing focus on the geopolitical dimensions of internet governance and data security. Additionally, the arrest of Telegram founder Pavel Durov at Paris airport in August 2024 highlights the legal scrutiny faced by tech entrepreneurs on an international scale. This regulatory approach may signal that tech companies, once hailed as pioneers of the digital age, are now increasingly subject to significant oversight.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal and alleged foreign interference in election processes have significantly increased public reaction and skepticism regarding the use of personal data and its impact on privacy and democracy. Although the extent of its impact is still unknown, the Romanian presidential elections, which were canceled after Russia was accused of influencing them through social media channels, can be cited as an example of the sensitivity of lawmakers and regulators on this issue. This evolving environment reflects growing calls for greater accountability and transparency in the technology sector. Governments are also acting in line with public demands. However, since Edward Snowden's revelations, we have learned that the lines between public and private intelligence activities have become blurred, even in advanced democracies, and that cooperation and dependencies between state security authorities and high-tech companies have increased (Maréchal, 2017). Considering the information revealed by Snowden, the regulatory measures taken by states can be seen not only as a response to society's demands for accountability, but also as part of states' strategies to increase their own power and control. The combination of public and private sector surveillance capabilities has created a complex dynamic that drives states to regulate technology companies to use or limit these capabilities. Considering this information, the extent to which internet companies operating under the principles of surveillance capitalism, especially platforms that enable micro-targeted political advertising, will be subject to regulation must be considered in parallel with the extent to which these companies can influence the political process. I believe that the findings of studies such as this research will be valuable in defining the powers of the regulatory body and the limits of regulation. This is because we are closely monitoring examples where institutions established with the aim of protecting freedom of expression and combating disinformation, but which are disconnected from civil society and lack transparency and empirical findings, can increase state control and further suppress dissenting voices.

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The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theories in Turkish Politics: Leadership Discourse, Motivations, and Analytical Frameworks

Abstract

This study analyzes the place of conspiratorial discourse in institutional speeches in Turkish politics during the AKP era and examines how often, under what conditions, and for what purposes it is used by political leaders. The research compiled a dataset of 1,463 parliamentary group speeches from the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), People's Democratic Party (HDP), and the Good Party. The study was conducted using a two-stage content analysis design. In the first stage, a lexicon-based analysis was applied to all speeches, quantitatively mapping the temporal trajectory of conspiratorial rhetoric across parties and years, along with its key determinants. Using OLS regression models, the study examined which parties and which structural/contextual conditions led to a concentration of conspiratorial discourse. The OLS regression results show that all parties used more conspiratorial rhetoric during periods when they felt threatened; opposition parties used this rhetoric less than the AKP, while the MHP used it more frequently than the AKP. Frequency analyses show that ruling parties resort to conspiratorial discourse more frequently in years marked by economic difficulties and threats to the party. Opposition parties such as the CHP, HDP, and İYİ Party generally use this discourse more sparingly, but a relative increase in conspiratorial rhetoric is observed in these parties during periods of threat. In the second stage, a total of 129 speeches randomly selected from parties and years between 2003 and 2021 were manually coded in detail. This qualitative analysis reveals the content and context of conspiratorial discourse, the themes on which political leaders use this rhetoric, their purposes, and the actors they target. The results show that the AKP and MHP use conspiratorial rhetoric as a multifaceted political tool, particularly in the areas of domestic policy, foreign policy, and the economy; that ruling parties strengthen conspiratorial discourse during times of crisis; and that they increase the diversity of target actors. Overall, both dictionary-based and manual analyses show that conspiratorial discourse in Turkey has increasingly become a strategy within politics, particularly among the ruling parties, and that the ruling parties have adopted this language as a strategy that reinforces social polarization and democratic regression.

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Democracies survive not only through elections and institutions, but also through the consent of citizens and their relationship with politics. One of the effective dynamics of democratic erosion is the undermining of citizens' relationships with politics. Conspiracy theories, frequently used and circulated by political leaders, play a critical role in this relationship. Conspiracy theories shape how citizens interpret politics, what they expect from democracy, and how they respond to political events. In recent years, it has been observed that conspiratorial rhetoric has become an increasingly central tool in the language of political leaders, not only in authoritarian regimes but also in established democracies. Therefore, revealing how often and for what purposes conspiracy theories are used by political leaders is critical not only for understanding political communication but also for understanding the continuity of democratic culture.

Keywords

Democratic erosion, parliamentary speeches, conspiracy theories, conspiratorial rhetoric, Türkiye

Introduction

This study examines the role of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics during the AKP era, focusing on the use of conspiracy rhetoric by political leaders. To understand the "supply side" of conspiracy theories, a content analysis of parliamentary group speeches was conducted. The main objective of the research is to reveal what kind of clues the conspiratorial rhetoric used by political elites provides about the understanding of politics and governance in the process of democratic regression.

Within the scope of the study, a total of 1,463 parliamentary group speeches made by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the Good Party (İYİ Parti) between 2003 and 2022. The content analysis was conducted using two different methods. First, a dictionary-based analysis was applied to speeches covering the years 2003–2022; here, a dictionary containing keywords related to conspiratorial discourse was used. This analysis aimed to quantitatively map the general appearance of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics. Second, a manual and qualitative content analysis was performed on a total of 129 speeches, with two speeches randomly selected from each party and year between 2003 and 2021. (Speeches from 2022 were not included in the manual analysis as they were compiled later.) This qualitative analysis provides an in-depth look at the role of the discourse in Turkish politics by examining the context, subtleties, and underlying motivations of conspiratorial rhetoric more closely.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: Under what conditions do political elites resort to conspiratorial rhetoric? What types of discourse strategies stand out? How does conspiratorial discourse shape leaders' understanding of politics? The following section summarizes the literature focusing on politicians' use of conspiracy theories. Subsequently, the rationale for creating the dataset, the reasons for selecting parliamentary group speeches, and the data collection process will be detailed. Then, explanations regarding the methodology will be presented; the approaches followed and techniques used in content analysis will be conveyed. Finally, findings regarding the

prevalence of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics during the period of democratic regression will be shared.

1. The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Political Elites

The literature on conspiracy theories examines the supply side in a multifaceted manner, particularly the role of political elites in the production and dissemination of these theories. Researchers have examined this dynamic in different political contexts—from democracies to authoritarian regimes—and have revealed the complex interplay of motivations and strategies employed by political leaders. Understanding the supply side of conspiracy theories requires examining how they are used in different political contexts. Conspiracy theories are not limited to a specific type of political regime; they emerge in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. However, the dynamics of the supply side can vary significantly depending on the political environment. Authoritarian governments are associated with belief in conspiracy theories (Allington et al., 2021). Authoritarian leaders emphasize existential enemies and promote conspiracy theories, presenting a narrative of victimhood. These regimes provide fertile ground for the prevalence of conspiracy theories. For example, Koehler-Derrick and colleagues (2021) found that authoritarian governments "supply" conspiracy theories more than democratic governments. Political actors in countries with institutional weaknesses produce alternative narratives of power through conspiracy theories for their political purposes. For example, before establishing his rule as Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini strongly believed in complex conspiracy theories, particularly those focusing on the so-called Jewish conspiracy (Taheri, 1985). After Khomeini's death, the Iranian government continued to spread conspiracy theories about Jews attempting to establish world domination (Küntzel, 2012, p. 247). Similarly, Serbian nationalist movements have also resorted to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Byford and Billig, 2001).

The authoritarian military regime in Egypt has used conspiracy narratives accusing the autonomous civil society of serving the interests of foreign governments (Hamzawy, 2018, p. 494). Radnitz (2018) argues for the close relationship between authoritarianism and politicians' conspiratorial rhetoric. In line with Radnitz (2018), Giry and Gürpınar (2020) also argue that conspiracy theories reinforce the authoritarian character of the regime. For example, the collapse of the Soviet regime, which had a strong conspiratorial past in the Russian Federation, led to the further institutionalization of conspiracy theories. In environments where freedom of expression about the government's shortcomings is suppressed, conspiracy theories are systematically used to manipulate public opinion; they fill public discourse with misleading information and outright falsehoods. For example, Egyptian generals have used conspiracy theories to discredit civil society, particularly to silence the voices of young opposition activists (Hamzawy, 2018). This disinformation strategy has the effect of suppressing opposition movements and weakening those who criticize the regime.

Political elites also employ conspiracy theories in democratic regimes. In democracies, the use of conspiracy theories is often examined through populist parties and leaders. The rise of right-wing populist parties and the increasing spread of conspiracy theories in democracies are intertwined. For example, Plenta (2020), focusing on anti-Soros conspiracy theories in Hungary and Slovakia, shows how populist politicians in democratic countries use conspiracy theories to gain support for anti-democratic policies and decisions. Similarly, Zvada (2022), examining Slovak parliamentary discourse, found that anti-Soros conspiratorial rhetoric is used to delegitimize political opponents and spread antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, populist conspiracy narratives trigger corresponding Manichaeian (good-evil polarization) perceptions in the public sphere. The conspiratorial discourse of Trump and Wilders demonstrates that populist politicians create a strong distinction between the general population and corrupt elites or dangerous groups; these groups are alleged to collaborate to conceal their hidden agendas and maintain power imbalances (Hameleers, 2021). Similarly, Sawyer and Kalaycı (2022), analyzing an extensive compilation of Donald Trump's speeches, revealed how these references serve to forge a strong connection with the populist movement. The findings show that conspiracy theory rhetoric serves both a demonization and a mobilization function; it is used to demonize opponents, stereotype the opposing camp, and delegitimize political institutions. At the same time, it also serves to coordinate supporters' attention and strengthen group identity.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories enable populist leaders to engage with voters through emotional narratives and present global politics from a dualistic perspective. Wojczewski (2022), who examines the conspiratorial discourse of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD), reveals that populist leaders in democracies resort to conspiracies to challenge mainstream discourse, portray the populist as a hero who exposes conspiracies against popular sovereignty, and promise to reestablish unity. Finally, conspiracy theories are also instrumentalized by populist leaders to evade accountability and justify institutional transformations. Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil (Kalil et al., 2021; Guimarães et al., 2023) and Chavez's administration in Venezuela (Hernaiz, 2008) can be seen as examples of this.

Regardless of the country's regime, understanding why political leaders resort to conspiratorial narratives is critical to revealing how conspiracy theories can harm functioning democracies. Therefore, exposing these intentions is of great importance. Previous studies point to several main objectives: (1) targeting and discrediting political rivals, (2) mobilizing supporters, (3) establishing legitimacy and justifying authoritarian policies, (4) evading responsibility, and (5) preventing or managing threats.

First, leaders strategically use conspiracy theories to deepen group identity by framing issues as threats and positioning themselves as champions of the victimized group (Radnitz, 2022). When faced with criticism, leaders often attack those who accuse them using conspiracy theories rather than addressing the accusations directly. Similarly, leaders frequently resort to conspiracy theories to discredit potential rivals. They achieve this by spreading false narratives accusing their rivals of wrongdoing; for example, Donald Trump claimed during the 2016 Republican primary race that Ted Cruz's father was involved in President John F. Kennedy's assassination by Lee Oswald (Ren et al., 2022). By using conspiracy theories against rivals, leaders stir up powerful emotions such as anger and rage among their followers. These intense emotions can weaken rational thinking and critical processes, making it easier for followers to take action against rivals without questioning the ethics of the leader's agenda. For example, during the 2013 Istanbul Gezi Park protests, the government resorted to conspiracy theories claiming that the demonstrations, initially seen as a grassroots movement against urban transformation plans, were actually part of a US and Zionist conspiracy to hinder Turkey's progress (Radnitz, 2022). This situation reveals how conspiracy theories can be used to delegitimize opponents and demonstrate the government's access to intelligence, particularly in response to visible threats such as mass anti-government demonstrations.

Second, leaders use conspiracy theories to unite their followers against a common enemy that threatens their interests and to mobilize support (Watanabe, 2018). Many conspiracy theories depict a malicious actor engaged in covert activities to harm the welfare of followers. For example, Palestinian leaders have disseminated a conspiracy theory through official channels that Israel is using rats to drive Arab families out of the Old City in Jerusalem (Ren et al., 2022). In this way, the portrayal of the enemy triggers emotions such as anger and anxiety among followers, strengthening their sense of solidarity. Leaders may view the unity of their followers as an opportunity to strengthen and maintain authority.

Thirdly, government officials promote conspiracy theories to legitimize their administration and justify authoritarian policies. Political leaders use conspiracy theories to consolidate the power of the status quo, limit public debate, and create enemies in order to legitimize their governance and justify injustices (Giry and Gürpınar, 2020; Radnitz, 2018). The capacity of conspiracy theories to increase the cohesion of their followers enables leaders to consolidate their power (Ren et al., 2022). In this context, conspiracy theories serve as a tool for governments to protect and legitimize their current political positions (Karaosmanoğlu, 2021).

Fourth, political elites resort to conspiracy theories to evade responsibility. Conspiracy theories enable leaders to gain general approval; a threat to the country is revealed, and conspirators are held responsible for crises and shortcomings (Wojczewski, 2021). For example, Hernaiz (2008) showed that Chavez used conspiracy theories in Venezuela to divert attention from problems that were the government's responsibility and to legitimize his authoritarian policies.

Fifth, it has been found that political elites resort to conspiracy theories more frequently when they feel threatened (Radic, 2018; Ren et al., 2022). They employ conspiratorial discourse to prevent or manage the threat. For example, Koehler-Derrick and colleagues (2021) examined the supply of conspiracy theories through state-owned newspapers in Egypt and found that the state excessively disseminated conspiracy theories during periods when the regime's stability was under threat.

Existing research on the supply side of conspiracy theories often exhibits certain limitations, such as focusing on specific contexts, actors, or time periods, and concentrating on a single type of conspiratorial rhetoric. Many studies limit their scope to a specific category of conspiracy theory (e.g., anti-Soros conspiracies in Eastern Europe), a single group of actors (e.g., ruling party leaders or main opposition leaders), or a narrow time frame. Furthermore, while some studies examine the conspiratorial discourse of populist opposition parties, most research focuses on the rhetoric of government elites. This study, however, offers a broader perspective by focusing on the conspiratorial discourse of all opposition parties with parliamentary representation and the ruling party. The research aims to contribute to the literature by covering different political parties and time periods, without limiting itself to specific conspiracy theories.

1.1. The Supply Side of Conspiracy Thinking in Türkiye

In the Turkish context, studies on conspiracy theories mainly focus on the supply side (Nefes, 2018; Gürpınar & Nefes, 2020; Karaosmanoğlu, 2021). For example, Gürpınar and Nefes (2020) examine conspiracy theories in Turkey by tracing their historical roots. The authors argue that conspiracy thinking in Turkey is rooted in historical traumas stemming from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The Treaties of Sèvres and Lausanne are the source of existential fears and conspiracy theories in Turkey. The so-called "Treaty of Sèvres Syndrome" and the Treaty of Lausanne have been the source of conspiratorial rhetoric that Turkey is under attack from the West (Yılmaz, 2006; Guida, 2008; Göçek, 2011; Gürpınar & Nefes, 2020). In addition, there are studies that examine the Turkish conspiracy environment through the concepts of "higher mind" (Karaosmanoğlu, 2021), "deep state" (Nefes, 2018), and antisemitic discourse (Nefes, 2013). Karaosmanoğlu (2021) examined the concept of "higher mind" and conspiracy narratives in Turkey, revealing the rationale behind this rhetoric. Nefes (2013, 2015, 2017) has shown that members of Turkish political parties embrace or avoid conspiracy theories depending on ideological and situational conditions. Government supporters tend to believe in protest-themed conspiracy theories produced by the government, while government opponents question these conspiracies. Furthermore, the AKP government's conspiratorial discourse has also been examined through security narratives. Yılmaz and Şipoli (2022) argue that narratives involving fear, trauma, nostalgia, existential insecurity, victimhood, and conspiracy theories are used by the AKP government as psycho-political tools for authoritarianism.

In summary, the literature suggests that political leaders resort to conspiracy theories during times of crisis for five potential reasons: to establish legitimacy and justify authoritarian policies, to target political rivals, to mobilize support, to evade responsibility, and to prevent or manage threats. However, the existing literature generally has a narrow perspective, focusing on a specific time frame, certain conspiracy theories, or particular groups of actors. It aims to contribute by examining the conspiratorial discourses of different political parties without limiting them to a single conspiracy theory and by analyzing them over a broad time frame.

2. Research Design: Content Analysis of Parliamentary Group Speeches

2.1. Data

This study uses 1,463 parliamentary group speeches from 2003 to 2022 to examine the conspiratorial discourse in the speeches of political party leaders in Turkey. The AKP era, which stands out as a period marked by a clear democratic regression and deepening political polarization in Turkey, provides a unique context for analyzing the role of conspiratorial rhetoric in political discourse. The reshaping of the political arena in Turkey since 2003, tensions regarding the separation of powers, the decline in media freedom, and the increase in social polarization have encouraged both the ruling party and the opposition to instrumentalize conspiratorial discourse. Therefore, analyzing the parliamentary group speeches made during the AKP period provides a comprehensive and up-to-date framework for understanding how conspiratorial rhetoric is produced, legitimized, and disseminated to the public by politicians during processes of democratic regression.

In this context, the analysis covers the speeches made by the leaders of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) between 2003 and 2022: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ahmet Davutoğlu, and Binali Yıldırım; leaders of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Deniz Baykal and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu; Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Chairman Devlet Bahçeli; co-chairs and group spokespersons of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtaş, Osman Baydemir, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, Gülten Kışanak, Ertuğrul Kürkçü, Sebahat Tuncel, Serpil Kemalbay, Figen Yüksekdağ, Ayhan Bilgen, İdris Baluken, Pervin Buldan, Sezai Temelli, and Mithat Sancar, totaling 1,463 group speeches.

In Turkey, parliamentary group speeches are speeches regularly delivered by each political party represented in parliament. They are usually held every Tuesday when parliament is in session. In these speeches, party leaders explain their positions on important political developments on the agenda, respond to criticism, respond to other leaders, and address their electorate. Due to this regularity and political importance, group speeches are a valuable resource for researchers to analyze how leaders respond to current issues on a weekly basis (Öney & Selck, 2017).

There are four main reasons why I chose parliamentary group speeches as my data source. First, these speeches provide comprehensive and valuable insight into the issues that are prominent in mainstream politics. They enable us to track the transformation of political concepts over time, helping us understand how these concepts have evolved (Bicquelet & Mirwaldt, 2012; Ihalainen, 2017). They are a rich data source for analyzing the role of conspiratorial discourse in the political arena.

Second, because these speeches are made by various political parties, it allows for a comparative examination of how conspiratorial rhetoric is used in different ways on the same topic. Parliamentary data effectively captures elite discourse as texts in which leaders directly respond to current political issues during routine times (Draege, 2021; Elçi, 2019).

Third, the fact that these speeches are delivered weekly and directly respond to important political developments provides a unique opportunity to analyze the positions of leaders at critical moments. This platform allows for an in-depth analysis of how leaders deploy conspiratorial discourse in the face of significant political events.

Fourth, group speeches are unilateral (monological) addresses by leaders; therefore, they are frequently used both to justify their own policies and to respond to criticism. These speeches allow for the observation of interactions between leaders, communication with voters, and subtle shifts in discourse. Given the leader-centered nature of politics in Turkey, focusing on leaders' speeches provides deeper insights than other political actors (Elçi, 2019). Furthermore, these speeches play an important role in shaping political perceptions; they shape citizens' beliefs, knowledge, and perceptions about politicians (Van Dijk, 2003). Through these speeches, leaders attempt to persuade voters, influence social and political issues, and set the agenda and shape public opinion (Ilie, 2015). Analyzing the conspiratorial rhetoric in these speeches reveals the persuasive power of such thinking on citizens and how it is reflected in political agenda-setting processes. Thus, the political rationale behind leaders' conspiratorial discourse can be analyzed.

However, there are two main challenges in collecting and analyzing group speeches. First, accessing this data is quite difficult. There is no complete list of group speeches on the website or in the official archives of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Researchers must contact the relevant political parties directly. However, except for the MHP, most parties do not maintain systematic archives. Second, the data collection process has become difficult because the sources from which the speeches are collected vary. Some of the AKP's speeches have been compiled from books, while others are in video format. This situation highlights the complexity of using parliamentary group speeches as a data source.

In conclusion, analyzing parliamentary group speeches offers a valuable opportunity to understand how political concepts have changed over time, how leadership discourse has been shaped, and the place of conspiratorial rhetoric in Turkish politics. Given the leader-centered nature of politics in Turkey, these speeches serve as a unique source for understanding the political logic behind conspiratorial discourse.

Collecting all group speeches between 2003 and 2022 was a challenging process. The data was obtained by following these steps:

1. The group speeches of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the Good Party (İYİ Parti) were identified by tracking the weekly calendar of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) and various other sources.
2. The AKP's group speeches were compiled from the party's official website, YouTube, and books published by the AKP and the Presidency Publications. This multi-source strategy made it possible to access most of the AKP's speeches.
3. The MHP's group speeches were accessed through the party's official website and YouTube.
4. It was difficult to access CHP speeches prior to 2014. CHP provincial organizations and the CHP Information and Communication Technologies Unit were contacted, but no response was received. Bursa MP Lale Karabıyık was asked for information about the archive, but no records were found. Yüksel Taşkın, Özgür Özel, Engin Altay, Engin Özkoç, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and former leader Deniz Baykal were also contacted, but no response was received. However, CHP speeches from 2010 and 2011 were obtained from Berna Öney, a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Comparative Politics at the University of Oldenburg.
5. İYİ Party and HDP group speeches were accessed through the parties' official websites and YouTube channels.
6. As the official websites of the BDP and DTP were closed by court order, it was not possible to access the speeches of these parties. Although some speeches belonging to the BDP were accessed via YouTube, no group speeches belonging to the DTP could be found.

Despite all efforts, the CHP's early group speeches and some missing speeches belonging to the DTP and BDP could not be accessed through telephone calls and correspondence with the Grand National Assembly archives unit.

As a result, a total of 1,463 parliamentary group speeches were collected:

- AKP: 368,
- CHP: 368,
- MHP: 355,
- HDP: 217,
- Good Party: 104,
- BDP: 51.

Group conversations accessed via YouTube generated a total of 16,355 minutes (approximately 273 hours) of video content. This video content was transcribed using the Voicedocs software. More detailed information about the scope and sources of all collected conversations is provided in the supplementary table.

2.2 Method

I applied content analysis to parliamentary group conversations in order to examine the conspiratorial rhetoric used by political leaders in Turkey. This content analysis consists of two separate sections. The first section involves dictionary-based automatic analysis based on specific keywords. This method allows for a systematic and quantitative assessment of the prevalence of conspiracy-themed content without requiring manual coding of each speech. This analysis was applied to all parliamentary group speeches between 2003 and 2022 and includes OLS regression analyses and frequency analyses.

The second section adopts a qualitative approach, manually coding a total of 129 speeches, with two speeches randomly selected from each party and each year between 2003 and 2021. Speeches from 2022 were not included in this manual analysis as they were added to the dataset later. This manual analysis provides a more in-depth examination of the instrumentalization of conspiratorial discourse. The combined use of lexicon-based and qualitative techniques offers significant advantages in examining conspiratorial discourse in political speeches (Eberl et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2013). Using both methods together allows for the development of a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the role of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics.

This section consists of three parts. First, a general overview of content analysis and its objectives is provided. Second, the reasons for choosing content analysis as a research method are explained, and examples are given from recent studies that have used content analysis to examine conspiracy discourse. Third, the methodological framework for how content analysis was applied in my research is presented.

According to Krippendorff (2004, p. 18), content analysis is a research technique that aims to make repeatable and valid inferences about the context in which texts are used. Content analysis identifies recurring themes in various types of messages (Neuendorf, 2017 [2002]) and attempts to capture the meaning, emphasis, and themes in messages (Bicquelet and Mirwaldt, 2012; Altheide, 1996). It aims to understand the use of words in context, ensure that the message is represented correctly (Wimmer and Dominick, 2013), define communication characteristics, and make inferences about the possible outcomes of communication (Holsti, 1969).

There are several reasons for using content analysis in this study. First, qualitative content analysis allows for deep insight into the content (Nefes, 2020). Second, content analysis is a method that facilitates the examination of political discourse. The value of this method lies in its ability to simplify data, focus on specific topics within the data, and clarify the data related to these topics (Schreier, 2012). Third, examining the prevalence of conspiracy narratives through content analysis is a valuable approach for comparative studies dealing with skeptical narratives (Czech, 2019).

However, there are also some difficulties in the content analysis of conspiratorial discourse. First, the lack of a universally accepted definition of conspiracy theories limits the results of content analysis to the category systems and definitions used (Wimmer and Dominick, 2013). Different researchers may apply different categories and definitions. This is particularly evident in the field of conspiracy theories. Second, the inherent epistemological complexity of conspiracy theories makes it difficult to develop structural coding categories (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). For example, different conspiratorial narratives

may overlap or be interconnected; these narratives may be linked to broader frameworks encompassing numerous different conspiracy theories. Therefore, to establish connections between different narratives, it is necessary to be familiar with existing conspiracy theories, especially their relationships and terminology. In this context, simply reading the data is not sufficient to investigate the role of conspiratorial discourse; understanding the political context of the period is also critical.

Content analysis is a widely used method in the field of political communication (Graber and Smith, 2005; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2017). It is also recognized as an effective method in disinformation research (Staender & Humprecht, 2022). The origins of this method date back to Aristotle, who categorized the persuasive elements in political speeches (Blassing, 2022). Contemporary qualitative and analytical studies by Hawkins (2009), Van Dijk (1993, 2015), and Wodak (2013) have also used content analysis to analyze how political actors present themselves.

Content analysis is also frequently used in academic literature examining conspiracy theories. For example, letters sent to daily newspapers in the US (Uscinski and Parent, 2014), Polish news magazines (Czech, 2019), vaccine-related content on Pinterest (Guidry et al., 2015), comments made to a Dutch newspaper during the "post-truth" era (Harambam et al., 2022), COVID-19 disinformation on Instagram (Quinn et al., 2021), and conspiracy content on Facebook (Frischlich, 2022) have been examined using this method. In addition, content analysis is also widely used to analyze the conspiratorial discourse of right-wing populist actors. Hameleers (2021) and Sawyer & Kalaycı (2022) used this method to understand the demonization and mobilization functions of conspiracy rhetoric.

Finally, there are different conceptualizations in studies on the content analysis of conspiratorial discourse. For example, Briones et al. (2012) conceptualized conspiracy theories as beliefs about financial motivations behind the promotion of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine by examining 172 YouTube videos. Other studies conceptualize conspiracy theories with elements such as claims about the origin and malicious purposes of COVID-19 (Islam et al., 2020); elements such as secret plans, conspirators, evidence, interconnectedness, dual worldviews, and scapegoating (Zvada, 2022); or public suspicions that powerful groups are withholding information to the detriment of the public (Czech, 2019).

Before moving on to the methods section, it is important to explain how the conspiratorial rhetoric used in this study was operationalized. Since there is no single, universally accepted definition of conspiracy theories, how this concept is operationalized depends on the chosen definition and distinguishing features. The following definition is adopted in this study: Conspiracy theories are claims about comprehensive plans by powerful actors who want to reshape and manipulate politics and society (Karaosmanoğlu, 2021; Fenster, 1999; Nefes, 2015). To distinguish them from other claims, the following core components are defined:

- Conspiracy theories suggest that power relations are secretly directed by malicious, powerful actors; their goal is to control a region, a nation, or the world (Butter and Reinkowski, 2014).
- The fundamental characteristic of conspiracy theories is that a secret plan aims to achieve dark goals by systematically deceiving the public (Wood and Douglas, 2013).
- Conspiracy theories often establish a threat relationship between a sense of "us" and a "malicious other" (Knight, 2000). Conspiratorial discourse creates an imaginary other that is the enemy of the people.

In this study, my aim is not to identify explicitly formulated conspiracy theories in political discourse, but rather to define conspiratorial rhetoric that refers to or implies such theories. Conspiratorial rhetoric is a form of language that explains events or phenomena by referring to the secret activities of powerful individuals or institutions (Zeng & Schäfer, 2021). I define conspiratorial rhetoric as rhetoric that refers directly or indirectly to conspiracy theories and implies the secret and malicious plans of powerful actors. For example, in a group speech on December 5, 2017, President Erdoğan used expressions such as "global tyranny," "the organizers of this blackmail," and "center of power." Such expressions have been evaluated as conspiratorial discourse. Similarly, expressions such as "setup" are considered part of conspiratorial rhetoric because they refer to covert plans aimed at shaping society or politics, even if they do not directly express a conspiracy theory. This distinction allows for the analysis of a broader spectrum of conspiratorial language, not limited to explicit conspiracy theories.

2.2.1 Automatic Analysis Method: Thematic Groups and Keywords

In the first phase of the study, automatic analysis (dictionary-based approach) was applied to all 1,463 group speeches between 2003 and 2022. Five speeches selected on a sample basis for each year, and party were carefully read, and the common features of the prominent conspiratorial rhetoric in the texts were classified into thematic groups. Considering the findings obtained from these readings, the prominent conspiratorial discourses in Turkish politics are rooted in seven main themes:

- **Foreign Powers and Foreign Intervention** (e.g., "puppet of the US," "dominant powers of the West," "plans of foreign powers," "certain international powers," "across the ocean," "satellite of the West," "secret protocol," "international coup attempt")
- **Internal Threats and Structures within the State** (e.g., "parallel structure," "deep state," "parallel conspiracy judiciary," "headquarters within the state," "parallel economy," "parallels within the judiciary")
- **Economic Conspiracy and Attack Allegations** (e.g., "economic attack," "interest lobby," "currency attack," "dollar baron," "economic trap," "manipulative currency," "economic sabotage," "threat to our economy," "financial attack")
- **Media, Perception, and Propaganda** (e.g., "perception operation," "media operation," "well-known media groups," "the trap of the pool media," "the main provocateur media," "a Western media mogul," "international companies such as Facebook")
- **Political Engineering and Chaos** (e.g., "dark political engineering," "chaos plan," "chaos trial," "chaos fuse," "putting street movements into action," "Gezi uprising," "Gezi aimed at division," "Gezi provocation")
- **Betrayal, Collaboration, and Subcontracting** (e.g., "collaborator supporter," "local collaborator," "AKP's subcontracting," "those who are their subcontractors," "betrayal lobby," "betrayal focus," "betrayal project")
- **Plot, Trap, and Scenario** (e.g., "setting up a trap," "judicial trap," "scheme and trap," "scenario," "game within a game," "playing a game," "plan within a plan," "designing," "insidious trap," "serious game," "staged scene," "ugly setup," "fake plan")

Sticking to these themes, a comprehensive list of keywords and phrases was used to capture the linguistic traces of conspiratorial rhetoric in the leaders' speeches. The complete list of keywords is as follows: "December 17-25 coup attempt," "July 20 civil coup," "puppet of the US," "US strategic plan," "US trap," "espionage and espionage activities," "AKP subcontracting," "open scheme," "scene

against him," "perception operation," "military-political operation," "main provocateur media," "main organizer," "Western manufacture," "Western media mogul," "Western imperialist," "Western hegemonic powers," "Western satellite," "fifth column activity," "gang of five," "a scenario," "a play," "certain powers," "in a coordinated manner," "a plan against us," "the Strangulation Plan," "Gezi aimed at division," "divisive lobby," "divisive focus," "Greater Middle East Project (BOP)," "destructive ambition," "this CNN," "through these operations," "falling for this game," "with this game," "against these games," "to disrupt this game," "this game too," "within this arrangement," "this setup too," "this trap too," "murky calculations," "those acting as their subcontractors," "a grand game," "spies," "serious game," "interest groups," "partners in interest," "ugly scenario," "ugly game," "ugly scheme," "very serious operation," "very dirty game," "very dangerous scenario," "plan to bring down," "coup scenario," "project of the case," "deep state," "headquarters within the state," "calculations of external powers," "external suggestions," "designing," "dollar baron," "dollar speculation," "exchange rate, interest rate, and inflation triangle," "currency operation," "world design," "attempt to destroy the order," "fake planned attack," "let the economy go downhill," "economic shipwreck," "economic operation," "economic sabotage," "economic attack," "economic assassination," "economic terrorist," "economic triggerman," "economic trap," "economic virus," "economic destructive activity," "threat to our economy," "forces that have taken our economy hostage," "walls of the economy," "call to stop the economy," "security-judiciary coup attempt," "imperialist scenario," "circles voluntarily sold to imperialists," "imperialists' project," "international companies such as Facebook," "interest lobby," "interest-exchange rate-inflation vicious triangle," "FETÖ supporters," "FETÖ's games," "extra," "financial attack," "bringing down with a storm," "nest of discord," "discordant mentality," "discordant person," "non-national centers," "midnight operation," "drilling holes in the ship's hull," "the real game," "Gezi uprising," "Gezi provocation," "those who set the streets on fire during Gezi," "hidden agenda," "secret partner," "secret protocol," "secret triggerman," "secret and mysterious hand," "secret and savage hand," "secret-open attack," "secret-hidden relationships," "gladio," "power center," "centers of power," "crusader cradle," "crusader fleet," "crusader mentality," "traitor quota," "traitor project," "traitor scenario," "the trap of the pool media," "open to any scheme," "any kind of provocation," "any kind of trap," "a calculation above calculations," "through allegations of fraud," "fueling internal turmoil," "the inside story," "slander campaign," "treason lobby," "treason center," "treason project," "treason network," "partner in treason," "manufactured project," "mortgaging," "collaborative supporters," "occupation plan," "kamikaze mission," "deception and trickery," "bloody game," "bloody scheme," "creating chaos to wear down the government," "chaos experiment," "chaos fuse," "chaos plan," "chaos foreman," "behind closed doors," "dark event," "dark scenario," "dark political engineering," "dark environment," "dark murder," "dark passage," "dark ambition," "dark power," "dark power center," "dark cell," "dark business," "dark chaotic picture," "dark media," "dark intention," "dark point," "dark focus," "dark event," "dark game," "dark scenario," "dark path," "dark journey," "counter-coup," "tape conspiracy," "deliberate campaign," "continuous attack process," "whose puppet," "concealing corruption," "dirty alliance," "dirty scenario," "dirty hand," "dirty hands," "dirty ambition," "dirty midnight attack," "dirty deal," "dirty relationships," "dirty cooperation," "dirty alliance," "dirty focus," "dirty game," "dirty bargaining," "dirty scenario," "dirty scheme," "conspirator," "conspiracy," "to command," "to set up a trap," "judicial trap," "trapper," "interest-debt spiral," "exchange rate-interest rate-inflation triangle," "exchange rate attack," "exchange rate weapon," "collapse through exchange rate," "the trap he set," "strategy with a global footing," "global baron," "global scenario," "global master," "global strife," "global power center," "the ambition of global powers," "the tool of global powers," "global bloody project," "global hotbed," "global game,"

"global scenario," "global regime of oppression," "set up," "set up game," "set up trap," "cursed hand," "lobby center," "London-based global fund," "well-known media groups," "manipulative currency," "puppet," "maps on their tables," "media operation," "letter correspondence," "mask of evil," "it's not about Gezi Park," "centers," "thief of national will," "staged scene," "those acting under the guidance of the opposition," "focal points of misfortune," "what kind of scenario was intended to be implemented," "neoliberal focal point," "who does it serve," "many games," "ocean-crossing connections," "dozens of contacts," "organized corruption," "Middle East project," "design of the Middle East," "covert embargo," "covert alliance," "covert operation," "covert or open alliance," "the game you play," "the game being played," "a game within a game," "a game on top of a game," "didn't fall for the game," "bringing to the game," "games being played," "disrupting the games," "setting up the games," "disrupting their games," "special army preparations," "apology lobby," "priest's robe," "money game," "parallel order," "parallel economy," "parallel conspiracy judiciary," "parallel system," "parallel structure," "parallel judiciary," "front organization," "Pennsylvania's media," "covering up," "plan within a plan," "planned operation," "news agency in disguise," "project-preparing centers," "project organizations," "psychological warfare," "staged play," "fake work," "mask of attacks," "blackmail circus," "palace game," "screenwriter," "script," "building the script on this," "evil game," "capital gang," "capital groups," "Sevr plan," "diabolical ambition," "cunning plan," "cunning game," "cunning trap," "cunning and dangerous initiative," "cunning operation," "scripted scenario," "civil coup," "political and social engineers," "attempt to design politics," "political operation," "putting street movements into action," "Soros type," "Sorosist," "social fault line," "planned operation on social media," "genocide operation," "strategic game," "artificial fluctuation," "betrayal of the process," "muddy the waters," "subcontracting," "in a way that creates unease," "orchestrated game," "orchestrated games," "schemes," "collaboration by chance," "triggermen," "under-the-table activities," "this is the setup," "setup and trap," "all kinds of games," "while setting the trap," "diagnosis of the trap," "traps," "a trap on top of traps," "paid agent," "a trap set for our country," "certain international powers," "international coup attempt," "international media in these operations," "international scheme," "covering up," "those who have plans for us," "the game being played on us," "covering it up," "a vicious game," "guardianship power," "guardianship focus," "judicial coup," "a new game," "redesign," "local collaborator," "destruction map," "destruction project," "those who make calculations," "high politics game," "elevation games," "humiliating trap," "confusing minds," "humiliation front," "humiliation figurehead," "humiliation alliance."

All these expressions consist of key words frequently used by political leaders within the framework of conspiratorial discourse and not only reflect the main themes in political rhetoric but also reveal the political polarization of the period and how conspiratorial discourse became institutionalized.

One part of the analysis consists of a dictionary-based automatic content analysis focused on specific keywords. The dictionary used in this analysis includes terms directly associated with conspiratorial discourse. The dictionary-based analysis works algorithmically to detect the presence of predefined words or phrases in parliamentary group speeches; when keywords are identified in the text, the relevant sentences are marked and recorded numerically. Thanks to this method, the prevalence of conspiracy-laden discourse can be measured systematically and quantitatively without the need to manually code each speech line by line. This provides an overview of how frequently these expressions are used and their distribution within the dataset. This process generally constitutes the first step in identifying trends and patterns in the use of conspiratorial rhetoric.

Dictionary-based analysis aims to map the general landscape of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics. The basic components of content analysis are defined by three units: the sampling unit, the data collection unit, and the analysis unit (White and Marsh, 2006). In this study, the sampling unit consists of the parliamentary group speeches analyzed, forming a subset of the population. The data collection unit consists of a total of 1,463 group speeches by parties that formed groups in the Turkish Grand National Assembly between 2003 and 2022. The unit of analysis is each sentence in these speeches. Each sentence has been automatically coded according to the presence of keywords in the conspiratorial discourse dictionary that was created. This coding process forms the basis for a comprehensive analysis of conspiratorial rhetoric in the context of parliamentary group speeches. To create a dictionary of conspiratorial discourse, 1,463 speeches were examined, and political developments between 2003 and 2022 were closely monitored. The political context of the period and the prominent conspiracy narratives are critical for establishing connections between different narrative forms. After acquiring the necessary information about the political context and examining the speeches in detail, a dictionary was developed containing key words frequently used by political leaders in conspiratorial rhetoric.

Content analysis is fundamentally concerned with the systematic organization and quantification of data. This process involves applying keywords to speeches via computer software so that large data sets can be processed automatically. Computer-assisted software is particularly critical for frequency calculations (Mackieson et al., 2019). The qualitative analysis software MAXQDA Analytics Pro was used in this study. MAXQDA enabled the identification of conspiratorial rhetoric in parliamentary group speeches, the coding of these expressions, and the analysis of their frequencies. Sentences containing conspiratorial discourse were coded using the software, and frequency tables were then created for each year. In the analysis, each sentence was treated as an independent unit of analysis. The annual rates of occurrence of conspiratorial discourse were calculated by dividing the number of conspiratorial sentences by the total number of sentences, and these rates were quantitatively evaluated in terms of their prevalence in the dataset.

In the quantitative analysis section of the study, both frequency analysis and OLS regression analysis were applied to the 1,463 group conversations collected. First, each conversation was grouped by year and party (e.g., AKP 2003, CHP 2014). In the automatic analysis, each sentence in the speech texts was scanned according to a predefined dictionary of conspiratorial keywords, and the ratio of sentences containing conspiratorial discourse to the total number of sentences ("conspiracy_percent") was calculated. This ratio forms the basic unit of analysis, and a row was created for each year-party combination.

In the frequency analysis, the distribution of conspiracy rhetoric across years and parties was visualized by taking the ratio of the total number of conspiracy sentences in that year and party to the total number of sentences in all speeches of that party in that year. Subsequently, OLS regressions were performed to understand under which conditions parties used conspiracy rhetoric more frequently. Here, the "conspiracy sentence ratio" (conspiracy_percent) calculated for each party-year was used as the dependent variable. The independent variables were coded as four basic binary (dummy) variables to capture the unique political contexts of the parties and years:

1. incumbent: coded as 1 if the party was in power that year, 0 otherwise. AKP was coded as 1 for every year; MHP was coded as 1 starting in 2018 (as a coalition member).

2. election: Coded as 1 if any national election (general, presidential, local election, or referendum) took place that year; 0 for other years. (Years with elections: 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019.)
3. economic_crisis: If a significant economic crisis, recession, or social deprivation occurred that year, it is coded as 1; other years are coded as 0. (Years coded as economic crisis: 2009, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022.)
4. party_threat: Years in which the party itself experienced a meaningful political, legal, or existential threat are coded as 1, others as 0. This was coded manually for each party separately, based on historical events and the political context.

The "party_threat" variable was determined based on developments such as pressure, exclusion, closure lawsuits, mass arrests, election failures, or legitimacy crises faced by parties. Sample coding and justifications for each party are as follows:

- Threat years for the AKP include: 2008 (party closure case), 2009 (global crisis), 2013–2014 (Gezi and December 17/25), 2016 (coup attempt), 2017 (state of emergency and constitutional amendment), 2019 (Istanbul election cancellation), 2020–2022 (economic crisis and authoritarianism).
- Threat years for the BDP/HDP: 2010–2011 (KCK operations), 2014 (Kobani events), 2016–2017 (post-coup operations and state of emergency), 2020–2022 (trustees, closure case, and crackdowns), involving mass arrests, political exclusion, and criminalization.
- Threat years for the CHP: 2010 (Ergenekon, Baykal crisis), 2012 (journalist arrests and increasing authoritarianism), 2014 (post-Gezi crackdowns), 2017–2018 (state of emergency and elections), 2020 (central intervention in municipalities), 2022 (Gezi trial and increasing polarization).
- For the MHP, the years of threat are: 2007 (return to parliament and the presidential crisis), 2011 (sex tape scandal), 2012 (nationalist reaction to the solution process), 2019–2022 (loss of municipalities, economic crisis, and rising opposition).
- The threat years for the İYİ Party are identified as 2018 (year of establishment and media embargo) and 2022 (attacks within the alliance and criminalizing rhetoric against the party).

Each variable was manually coded through careful examination of historical events and the political context. In the OLS models, each of these variables was used both to measure the general trend and to see differences on a party-by-party basis. First, all parties were analyzed together, then separate regression analyses were applied for each party and for the government-opposition blocs. These analyses systematically tested the conditions under which political parties increased conspiratorial discourse—particularly during periods of political fragility, economic stress, and electoral competition.

2.2.2. Manual Analysis

The other part of the analysis adopts a qualitative approach based on the manual coding of 129 randomly selected parliamentary group speeches. This manual analysis represents a more in-depth descriptive examination of the use of conspiratorial discourse. It looks more closely at the context of the speeches and the underlying motivations behind conspiratorial rhetoric, thereby accessing details that cannot be obtained through automatic analysis.

The main reason for choosing manual coding for qualitative analysis is that qualitative perspectives can present the depth and subtlety of the content in a way that automated methods cannot (Nefes, 2020; White and Marsh, 2006). While automated analyses are a very useful tool for efficiently processing large data sets, they have certain limitations. Because automated methods rely on specific keywords or phrases, they may not cover the entire spectrum of conspiratorial discourse and risk overlooking important examples that are not directly expressed with predefined words. In contrast, manual analysis is much more flexible and less dependent on predefined criteria. Thus, even if conspiratorial rhetoric is not always expressed with the same pattern or keywords, researchers can identify it. This flexibility increases the comprehensiveness of the analysis and ensures that no important examples are overlooked.

Manual and in-depth analysis of conspiratorial discourse in politicians' speeches offers several important advantages. First, contextual complexities and linguistic subtleties that are not easily captured by automated methods can be examined in detail through manual analysis. Since conspiratorial rhetoric often operates through metaphors and indirect language use, manual analysis is more adept at deciphering such linguistic nuances (Saldaña, 2015). Thus, hidden meanings and implications in leaders' words can be revealed, even points that might be overlooked in automated analysis.

Second, manual analysis allows for a deeper look into the fundamental motivations and strategies of political leaders when using conspiratorial discourse. The researcher can better distinguish the purposes for which this type of rhetoric is used, such as persuasion, distraction, evasion of responsibility, or blame shifting. When the broader political context in which the speeches are delivered is examined, it becomes clearer how conspiratorial rhetoric is linked to important political developments and how it is strategically constructed (Nefes, 2020).

Third, manual analysis makes it easier to adapt to the changing and evolving nature of conspiratorial discourse. This is because conspiratorial rhetoric is not static; it has the characteristic of changing shape according to the political environment and social sentiments. The manual method allows the researcher to adapt the coding criteria to the situation, capturing the change in conspiratorial discourse over time more accurately.

In summary, a manual and detailed analysis of conspiratorial rhetoric in politicians' speeches offers a more sensitive view of linguistic subtleties, a better understanding of underlying motivations and strategies, and a deeper perspective on the political context. At the same time, it offers significant advantages in terms of adapting to the changing nature of discourse. These qualities contribute to a comprehensive investigation of the role of conspiratorial discourse in political discourse.

Manual analysis aims to enrich the background of quantitative findings obtained through automatic analysis and provide a more meaningful basis for interpretation by offering descriptive insights into the contextual and linguistic nuances of conspiratorial discourse. In manual analysis, the sampling unit is the entirety of the group speeches of political parties that formed groups in the Turkish Parliament between 2003 and 2021. Data collection units are derived from this broad pool of speeches. A total of 129 speeches were selected for manual analysis. During the selection process, two group speeches were chosen for each party and each year, thus creating a sample representing each year covered by

the study. The selected speeches were determined to be distributed homogeneously throughout the year, with one from the first six months of the year and one from the second six months, thus accounting for seasonal fluctuations in political discourse. Since the manual analysis was conducted earlier and the speeches for 2022 were compiled later, this analysis only covers speeches from 2003 to 2021; speeches from 2022 were not included in the study.

In the manual analysis, the unit of analysis is individual sentences within the selected speeches. The main focus of the analysis is to code whether each sentence contains conspiratorial rhetoric. This approach has made it possible to analyze in detail in which examples and how conspiratorial rhetoric appears in the speeches. To understand the data holistically, the selected speeches were read repeatedly, and during these readings, an inductive approach was used to discover how and for what purposes political leaders used conspiratorial rhetoric. During the coding process, sentences containing conspiratorial discourse were analyzed across three main categories.

First, sections coded by topic were grouped under three main headings:

- Domestic policy (e.g., inter-party competition, conflict with the opposition, internal security threats, and allegations against domestic actors),
- Foreign relations/foreign policy (e.g., narratives of threats and conspiracies involving foreign states, international organizations, or external powers),
- Economy (e.g., economic crisis, currency/speculation, externally sourced economic attacks, and allegations of economic manipulation).

Second, motivations were coded under six main headings to determine the purposes for which leaders used conspiratorial discourse:

1. Targeting political rivals or damaging their reputation,
2. Mobilizing their support base or drawing attention,
3. Ensuring the legitimacy of policies or justifying their implementation,
4. Avoiding responsibility, blaming others for failure or during a crisis,
5. Managing and defusing threats,
6. Targeting, criticizing, or accusing the ruling party or government bloc.

The third category consists of the accused actors. Actors or groups directly or indirectly accused in the coded segments (e.g., opposition parties, foreign states, media organizations, civil society, or specific social groups) are marked separately if specified.

Thanks to this detailed coding, both the topics on which conspiratorial discourse is concentrated and the motivations of leaders and the actors at whom they direct this discourse have been systematically analyzed.

3. Analysis and Findings

3.1 Automatic Analysis

This section presents a graph showing the distribution of conspiratorial discourse used by political party leaders in their parliamentary group speeches by year and party, along with OLS regression tables analyzing the determinants of conspiratorial rhetoric. Although a total of 1,463 group speeches were used in these regression analyses, 69 were reported as the number of observations in the

statistical models. This is because the data was grouped by year and party in the Excel file and during the analysis process. In other words, each row consists of the combination of all group speeches of a particular party in a particular year (e.g., "AKP 2003," "CHP 2014," "MHP 2022"). This format was designed to be fully compatible with the content analysis applied in MAXQDA, allowing for the measurement of the prevalence of conspiratorial discourse collectively for each year and party. As a result, the total number of observations in the OLS regression analyses consists of 69 rows representing each year-party combination of parties with a group in Parliament between 2003 and 2022.

Figure 1 below shows the annual distribution of conspiratorial rhetoric in the parliamentary group speeches of Turkey's five major political parties between 2003 and 2022. The data is based on dictionary-based coding generated by automatic analysis and shows the percentage of sentences in each party's speeches that used conspiratorial discourse each year. The graph strikingly reveals both differences between parties and fluctuations over time.

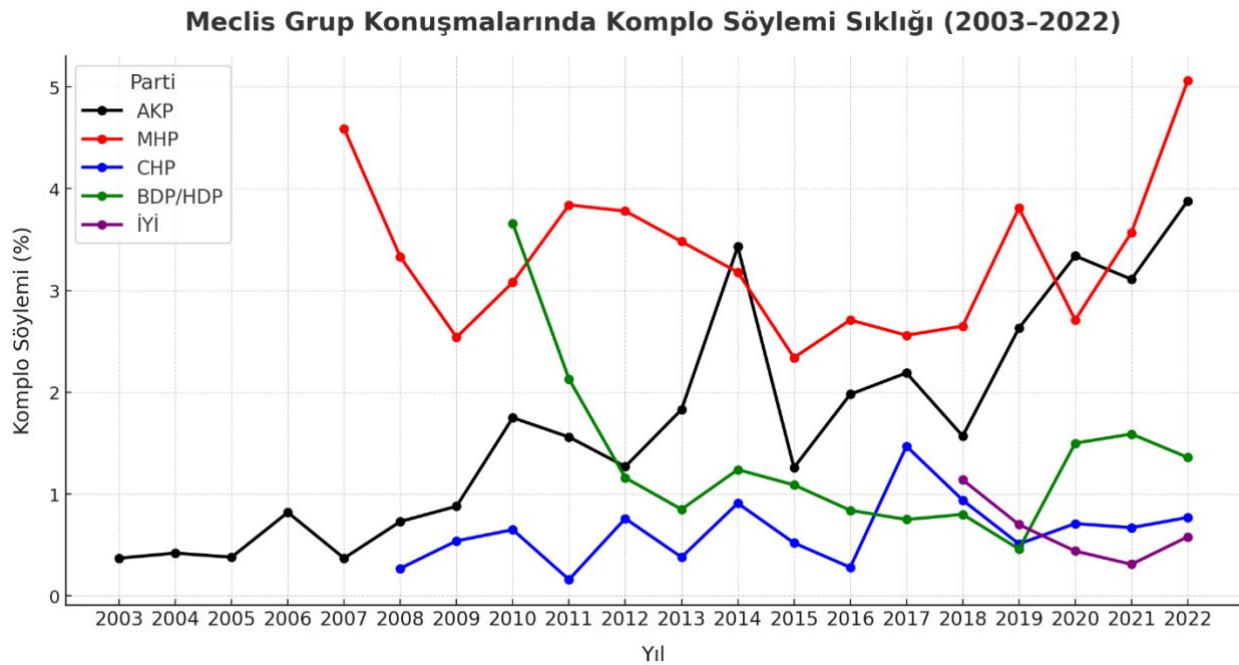


Figure 1. The Evolution of Conspiracy Rhetoric Over Time: Comparative Frequency Analysis of Turkish Political Parties' Group Speeches (2003–2022)

First, the MHP line (red) remains above the other parties throughout almost the entire period. The rate, which remained steady between 3% and 4.5% between 2007 and 2012, peaked at 5.1% in 2022. This finding suggests that conspiratorial rhetoric is a structural element in the MHP's political identity. As part of the nationalist ideology, discourses such as "external forces," "internal collaborators," and "secret plans" have been used forcefully not only in times of crisis but also during periods of stability. The MHP systematically maintains a conspiratorial worldview, placing both external enemy figures and the opposition at the center of political struggle through criminalizing language.

Secondly, the AKP's line (black) in the graph is characterized by more dramatic ups and downs. Usage, which remained at low levels (approximately 0.3–0.8%) between 2003 and 2009, rose significantly,

particularly in 2010, reaching 3.4% in 2014. Considering that this rise occurred in the context of the Gezi Park protests, the December 17–25 corruption investigations, and increasing social opposition, it can be said that the AKP used its conspiratorial rhetoric as a defense and counter-move strategy. The sharp decline in 2015 (1.3%) indicates a softening of rhetoric in the election atmosphere, while rhetoric hardened again after the coup attempt in 2016. The AKP systematically increased its conspiratorial rhetoric after 2018, reaching a high level of 3.9% in 2022. This suggests that conspiracy narratives became a central tool during a period of deepening authoritarianism and attempts to criminalize the opposition.

Thirdly, the CHP's line (blue) is more horizontal and low-profile. The CHP's conspiratorial rhetoric rate, which first appeared in the data in 2008, generally remained between 0.3% and 0.9%, showing a jump to 1.5% only in 2017 during the constitutional referendum process. This increase coincides with a period when the CHP reacted strongly to discussions of regime change. However, in general, the CHP has taken a cautious approach to conspiracy rhetoric, preferring to conduct political competition on a more institutional basis.

Fourth, the BDP/HDP's line (green) made a remarkable start at 3.7% in 2010 but declined rapidly from 2011 onwards. Its rhetoric softened, particularly during the resolution process, falling to around 0.5% by 2018. However, the rates approaching 1.6% again after 2019 suggest that a conspiratorial discourse has been reintroduced for defensive purposes in the face of pressure and attempts to criminalize the party. It is understood that this use is not the primary strategy of the opposition, but rather a reactive instrument.

Finally, the İYİ Party entered the data in 2018, and its line (purple) remains at a relatively low level compared to the others. It was observed to have partially resorted to conspiratorial rhetoric in its founding years (1.2%), but this rate subsequently fell to 0.3–0.6%. This is consistent with the party's "reasonable" opposition strategy appealing to the center-right.

These trends clearly show that conspiratorial rhetoric in Turkey exhibits a marked asymmetry in terms of the distinction between the ruling party and the opposition. In particular, it is seen that the MHP and AKP have increasingly relied on this discourse over time, and that conspiratorial narratives have become the language of politics at the institutional level, not just in times of crisis. These parties systematically use conspiratorial rhetoric for both defensive and mobilization purposes; they instrumentalize this discourse to reinforce political legitimacy, redefine threats, and control the public sphere. On the other hand, opposition parties such as the CHP, HDP, and İYİ Party have distanced themselves from conspiratorial language, emphasizing that discursive competition should be conducted through legitimate and critical channels. However, in certain periods—such as referendums or times of repression—limited use of conspiratorial language has also been observed in these parties.

In conclusion, these data reveal that conspiratorial rhetoric has become a discourse tool that is increasingly normalized, particularly among those in power, and fuels polarization in Turkish politics. The graph also provides evidence of the linguistic manifestations of democratic regression and makes visible how political communication is integrated into the process of authoritarianism.

Table 1 below presents the OLS regression results, created to test which structural and conjunctural factors are associated with the rates of conspiratorial discourse obtained through automatic analysis. In this model, the annual rate of conspiratorial discourse used by parties in group speeches was taken as the dependent variable; the effects of variables such as party identity, economic crisis, election year, whether the party is in power, and political threats against the party were analyzed together. Thus, the tendencies of different parties and political contexts to resort to conspiratorial rhetoric were evaluated comparatively.

Table 1. Determinants of Conspiratorial Discourse in Political Party Group Speeches (OLS Regression Results)

Variables	Model 1
BDP/HDP	-0.01 (0.01)
CHP	-0.01** (0.01)
İYİ	-0.01** (0.01)
MHP	0.02*** (0.01)
Economic crisis	0.00 (0.00)
Party threat	0.01*** (0.00)
Seçim yılı	0.00 (0.00)
Election year	-0.00 (0.01)
Fixed	0.01*** (0.01)
Number of Observations	69
R-squared	0.714

Note. This table presents unstandardized coefficients and robust standard errors in parentheses. The asterisks in the table indicate statistical significance levels (*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$). The reference category is AKP.

As seen in Table 1, although the effects are quite minimal, the significant factors affecting the rate of conspiratorial discourse in party group talks are party identity and the presence of threats to the party. In the regression, the AKP was taken as the reference category; that is, the coefficients for other parties show the difference in the rate of conspiratorial discourse compared to the AKP.

According to the results, the MHP uses a significantly higher proportion of conspiratorial discourse in its group speeches compared to the AKP ($b=0.02$, $p<0.01$). The CHP and İYİ Party, on the other hand, use significantly lower levels of conspiratorial discourse compared to the AKP (both $b=-0.01$, $p<0.05$). Although the coefficient for the BDP/HDP is negative, it is not statistically significant.

Variables such as economic crisis, election period, or being in power did not show a significant effect. On the other hand, the "party_threat" variable (pressure on the party, closure case, etc.) stands out as a strong and significant factor in the increase in conspiratorial discourse ($b=0.01$, $p<0.01$). The model has high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.714$) and was based on a total of 69 party-years of observation. These findings show that the MHP, in particular, resorts to conspiratorial rhetoric more than the AKP and that threats against parties play an important role in the increase of this discourse. When examining the overall effects, only party threat (party_threat) and party identity emerge as significant and decisive factors. However, interactive analyses were conducted to understand how these relationships change according to the political context and the ruling-opposition distinction. Table 2 shows the model based on the interaction between economic crisis and being in government. In this model, how conspiratorial discourse differed between parties and statuses during years of economic crisis was systematically tested.

Table 2. Economic Crisis and Being in Government Interactive OLS Model

Variable	Coefficient (Std. Error)
Economic Crisis (economic_crisis)	-0.01*** (0.00)
In Government (govstatus)	-0.00 (0.00)
Economic Crisis × Government (interaction)	0.02*** (0.01)
Party Threat (party_threat)	0.00 (0.00)
Election Year (election)	0.00 (0.00)
Fixed	0.02*** (0.00)
Number of observations	69
R-squared	0.31

Note. The table shows the unstandardized coefficient results of the OLS regression ((## factor variable model) with the dependent variable being the conspiracy speech rate (conspiracy_percent). Stars indicate statistical significance; values in parentheses represent robust standard errors *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$.

In this model (Table 2), the dependent variable is the conspiracy rhetoric rate calculated for each party and year. The model analyzes the effect of structural and cyclical factors such as party threat and election year, along with economic crisis, being in government, and their interaction, on the level of conspiracy rhetoric.

In this interaction model, the main effects are only valid for the reference group (here, the opposition), while the total effect for the ruling party is calculated as the sum of the main coefficient and the

interaction term. In such models established with the factor variable ("##") in Stata, the coefficients are interpreted through reference categories, and the interaction term allows us to distinguish between the government and opposition differences specifically in the crisis year.

The results of the model show that economic crises reduce conspiratorial rhetoric in opposition parties, while increasing it in government parties. This difference indicates that government parties use conspiratorial narratives more intensively as a defense and responsibility-shifting strategy during crisis periods.

Table 3 analyzes the interaction between the threat year effect for the party and the status of being in government. In this model, how party threats affect conspiratorial rhetoric in government and opposition parties is tested separately.

Table 3. Party Threat and Being in Government Interactive OLS Model

Variable	Coefficient (Std. Error)
Party Threat (1)	0.00 (0.00)
Being in Government (1)	0.00 (0.00)
Party Threat × Being in Government (1)	0.00 (0.01)
Economic Crisis	-0.00 (0.00)
Election Year	0.00 (0.00)
Fixed	0.01*** (0.00)
Number of Observations	69
R-squared	0.13

Note. The table shows the unstandardized coefficient results of the OLS regression ((## factor variable model) with the dependent variable being the conspiracy theory rate. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The findings in Table 3 do not show a significant relationship in terms of either the main effect (party_threat) or the interaction with being in government (party_threat × govstatus). However, in the general model (Table 1), the party_threat variable was statistically significant and positive. This difference indicates that in the general model, party threat years created an average increase across the entire sample (both government and opposition), but this effect did not differ significantly when combined with being in government. In other words, although threat years increased the level of conspiratorial discourse on average, this increase did not show a systematic divergence between government and opposition parties. Furthermore, the relatively small number of observations and the fact that party threat years are scattered across a small number of examples may have led to a loss of statistical significance. In conclusion, this model shows that the increase in conspiratorial discourse during years when parties were under threat is essentially a general trend, and that being in government does not significantly alter this effect.

Table 4 analyzes the effect of the election year on conspiratorial discourse in conjunction with being in government. The model was constructed using a factor variable (##) approach to systematically test the effects of election periods and being in government on increasing or decreasing conspiratorial rhetoric.

Table 4. Election and Being in Government Interactive OLS Model

Variable	Coefficient (Std. Error)
Election Year (1.election)	0.00 (0.00)
In Government (1st govstatus)	0.01* (0.00)
Election Year × In Government (1.election#1.govstatus)	-0.01 (0.01)
Economic Crisis	0.00 (0.00)
Party Threat	0.01* (0.00)
Fixed	0.01** (0.00)
Number of Observations	69
R-squared	0.13

Note. The table presents the unstandardized coefficient results of the OLS regression, with the dependent variable being the proportion of conspiratorial discourse, showing the interaction between election year and government status (## factor variable model). Robust standard errors are provided in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

According to Table 4, the variables of being in government and party threat are only marginally significant (single asterisk, $p < 0.1$); that is, they show borderline significance rather than a consistent effect. The interaction with the election year effect is not significant. This finding shows that election periods alone or in combination with being in government do not have a systematic and clear effect on conspiratorial rhetoric. It is understood that conspiratorial discourse may increase slightly in situations such as being in government and party threat, but these effects are only marginally significant in this model. In conclusion, the model shows that being in government and years of party threat increase the level of conspiratorial rhetoric, but election years alone or in combination with being in government do not create a significant change.

The OLS regression analyses conducted in this study quantitatively tested the role of party identity and conjunctural conditions in explaining the level of conspiratorial rhetoric used in party group speeches. The findings show that inter-party differences are among the key determinants of conspiratorial discourse. When the AKP is taken as the reference category, it was observed that the MHP used significantly more conspiratorial rhetoric in its group speeches; in contrast, the CHP and İYİ Party used significantly less conspiratorial discourse. For the BDP/HDP, a negative difference was observed, but this result is not statistically significant.

Furthermore, the presence of threats against parties (e.g., closure lawsuits, pressure, or exclusion) showed a significant and positive relationship in the general model. This indicates that parties under

threat resort to conspiratorial discourse more frequently. However, when examining the interaction of this effect with being in government, the statistical significance of the effects disappears. This finding indicates that the effect of party threats does not create a systematic difference between governing and opposition parties.

Interactive models were created to detail the effects of contextual variables such as economic crisis, election year, and being in government on conspiratorial rhetoric. The findings reveal that the interaction between economic crisis and being in government is significant, and that government parties increase their use of conspiratorial rhetoric during periods of economic crisis. This suggests that ruling parties use conspiratorial discourse more intensively as a form of defense or evasion of responsibility during times of crisis. However, the interaction between election year and being in government is not significant; that is, election periods do not create a noticeable difference in the level of conspiratorial discourse.

Some limitations of the analyses should also be considered. In some interactive models, the coefficients are small and only marginally significant. For example, the variables of being in government and party threat show significance at the $p < 0.1$ level in some models, indicating that the practical importance of the effects may be limited. Furthermore, the small number of observations in the dataset and the low variance of some variables may have reduced the statistical significance of certain interaction terms.

In conclusion, the findings show that party identity and threats directed at parties are the most important factors influencing the use of conspiratorial rhetoric by political actors in Turkey. In particular, the MHP's more intensive use of this rhetoric compared to the AKP and the increase in conspiratorial discourse by parties under threat indicate that such narratives are used in specific strategic contexts. On the other hand, the impact of conjunctural periods such as election years remains limited; it is understood that conspiratorial discourse is shaped more by structural differences and perceptions of threat.

In summary, the findings of the automated analysis presented in this section reveal how conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics has changed over time and across parties. Although the usage rates do not exceed 6% in any party, what is noteworthy here is that the texts examined are parliamentary group speeches, which are expected to be extremely formal and normative and closed to conspiratorial rhetoric. The fact that conspiratorial discourse finds a place as a consistent and recurring practice over the years, even in such institutional and public platforms, shows that this rhetoric is becoming increasingly institutionalized in the daily functioning of politics. Therefore, the findings indicate that conspiratorial rhetoric is no longer merely a tool specific to extraordinary or crisis periods but is increasingly being adopted by political actors in Turkish politics as a legitimate and routine political communication strategy.

Analyses show that the MHP and AKP systematically use conspiratorial rhetoric, especially during periods of crisis and pressure; this discourse has become a fundamental part of the party identity not only during moments of social or political crisis, but also during periods of stability. The MHP consistently employs high levels of conspiratorial rhetoric, while the AKP's use of conspiratorial discourse fluctuates, with marked increases during times of crisis. The CHP, HDP/BDP, and İYİ Party

have generally taken a more distant approach to this discourse but have used conspiratorial language to a limited extent during certain periods of crisis or pressure.

3.2. Manual Analysis

Manual analysis aims to enrich the background of quantitative findings obtained through automatic analysis and provide a more meaningful basis for interpretation by offering descriptive insights into the contextual and linguistic nuances of conspiratorial discourse. To enable a more in-depth and contextual examination of conspiratorial discourse, 129 parliamentary group speeches were manually analyzed and coded. In the first stage, the main themes on which conspiratorial rhetoric was concentrated were identified. Subsequently, the motivations of the parties in using conspiratorial discourse and the institutions/organizations/individuals targeted were analyzed. Before proceeding to these analyses, qualitative notes on the 129 speeches that were read and analyzed will be shared. These notes are important because they outline how the parties use conspiratorial discourse.

First, when two speeches selected from each year by the MHP were read, it was observed that the MHP consistently used conspiratorial rhetoric in its parliamentary group speeches, targeting various issues and using specific keywords. In 2007, the party focused on Middle Eastern politics, emphasizing the dangerous intentions of powerful actors in the region. That same year, concerns were expressed about attempts to exclude the MHP from the political arena, and accusations were made that international investment groups wanted to exploit Turkey's natural resources. In 2008, the MHP turned its attention to alleged secret and harmful collaborations between the European Union and the government. The party voiced its suspicions about the EU's strategic plans and its alleged use of the Turkish government as a subcontractor. In 2009, conspiratorial rhetoric about the Kurdish opening came to the fore, framing this process as a project of the US and the EU and claiming that the government played a leading role in implementing destructive plans. Furthermore, the government's relations with Armenia were also criticized. In 2010, the MHP continued its criticism of the Kurdish opening, describing the government as a puppet of foreign powers. That same year, the Greater Middle East Project was brought to the agenda, Erdoğan's role as co-chair of this project was emphasized, and it was alleged that there was a secret collaboration between Erdoğan and his European counterparts. In the following years, allegations of cooperation between the PKK and the AKP, Erdoğan's portrayal as an actor implementing the malicious plans of global powers, and suspicions that the government was involved in various projects such as the redesign of the Middle East came to the fore. In 2016, the MHP voiced its concerns about the elections, alleging that the government was carrying out chaos plans and attacks to secure an election victory. In 2017, allegations related to the FETÖ organization, US plans, and secret imperialist conspiracies against Turkey were brought to the fore. In 2018, attention was drawn to lobbies working against the People's Alliance, accusations against the Turkish Medical Association, and the government's role in the Syrian War being defended with conspiratorial rhetoric. Furthermore, allegations of global economic operations aimed at collapsing the Turkish economy were also brought to the fore. In the following years, the MHP continued to use conspiratorial rhetoric on issues such as the Eastern Mediterranean, Soros and Western powers, Osman Kavala, and alleged treacherous projects against Turkey.

These findings show that the MHP has adopted its conspiratorial rhetoric not as a temporary tool or one used only in times of crisis, but as a structural and persistent part of the party's political discourse. Expressions frequently used in group speeches, such as "external forces," "secret plans," and

"treacherous collaborators," have been regularly voiced not only during extraordinary periods but also within the routine political agenda. This suggests that the MHP has constructed a political universe that keeps the perception of threat alive and demonstrates a "national stance" against these threats, in line with its nationalist ideology. Thus, the party institutionalizes conspiratorial discourse by developing a language that criminalizes both external actors and internal opposition and uses this language as a strategic tool in political struggle.

Second, an examination of AKP group speeches reveals that over the years, the party has adopted a conspiratorial rhetoric by targeting specific issues and using certain keywords. In 2007, the party focused on elements hindering Turkey's development; in 2009, the conspiratorial discourse was directed at opposition parties seeking to weaken the AKP. In 2010, the target was opposition parties criticizing the Kurdish opening, while in 2011 and 2012, the Ergenekon trials and the alleged collaboration between the CHP and Ergenekon came to the fore. In 2013, the Gezi Protests became the center of the discourse; in the 2014 elections, the December 17–25 process, the Parallel Structure, and the Gezi events came to the fore. The 2015 elections were shaped around Gezi, the December 17–25 events, and the 2007 memorandum. The coup attempt became a major focus in 2016, while the 2017 elections, the IMF, corruption cases in the US, the Zarrab case, and again the December 17–25 events came to the fore. In 2018, FETÖ and the Syrian War were on the agenda; in 2019, the elections, the Syrian War, and economic attacks were reflected in the discussions. In 2020, the economic operations and covert initiatives carried out by the opposition were emphasized; in 2021, the alleged secret cooperation between the Nation Alliance and the HDP, economic operations, and financial attacks were on the agenda.

The following are among the keywords frequently used in the AKP's conspiratorial rhetoric: "game," "dirty games," "setup," "triggerman," "puppet," "sinister intentions," "dark plans," "trap," "dark forces," "conspirators," "capital groups," "dirty alliance," "dirty deals," "dirty collaborations," "order," "parallel judiciary," "perception operation," "dark accounts," "campaign," "international coup attempt," "sinister game," "centers of power," "global tyranny system," "conspiratorial centers," "centers that control our economy," "project organizations," "imperialist projects," "calculations," "plan to redesign the Middle East," "project," "financial attack," "fifth column activity," "high-level political games," "international espionage activities," "dirty deals," and "dark accounts."

These findings show that the AKP's conspiratorial rhetoric is not merely a temporary defense mechanism used during times of crisis but has become a political strategy that is increasingly frequent and evolving in content alongside the increasingly authoritarian regime. Initially used as a response to specific threats, this rhetoric has gradually transformed into a more systematic narrative that criminalizes the opposition, targets external forces, and deepens polarization within society. This transformation reveals that, for the AKP, conspiratorial discourse is not merely a style of expression but a functional tool of the process of authoritarianism. In other words, both the intensity and the content of the discourse are shaped in direct relation to the authoritarian character of the regime.

Thirdly, when examining the CHP's statements, in 2007, the CHP focused on exposing what it believed to be traps set by the AKP government. In 2009, the discourse shifted towards activities associated with Ergenekon and the deep state. In 2012, allegations that Erdoğan was collaborating with Western powers as a subcontractor came to the fore. In 2013, the Ergenekon theme returned to the agenda. In

2016, the CHP alleged that the AKP government had staged a countercoup against the Turkish nation. In 2017, this narrative continued, and the events were framed as a countercoup aimed at suppressing Turkey. In 2018, attention turned to the Greater Middle East Project, with Erdoğan depicted as co-chair and allegations made about traps and secret plans within the security forces. In 2019, it was alleged that Erdoğan had handed over Turkey's national secrets to the Qatari army. In 2020, conspiratorial rhetoric focused on the cooperation established between certain powers and Erdoğan in the context of Middle Eastern politics, with Erdoğan again being portrayed as a subcontractor and co-chair of the project. At the same time, economic traps and the "Gang of Five" rhetoric were also emphasized. Conspiracy-related keywords frequently used included "game," "conspiracy," "setup," "fake deals," "center within the state," "subcontracting," "planned operation," "forgery," "counter-coup," "civil coup," "co-chair of the Greater Middle East Project," "civil coup," "July 20 coup," "Pentagon gang," and "dollar barons."

The CHP's use of conspiratorial rhetoric has been more cautious and less intense than that of other parties, both in terms of frequency and content. This shows that the CHP only resorts to conspiratorial language at critical junctures such as regime change but generally adopts a political communication strategy that does not center on this type of rhetoric. The party has preferred to conduct political competition within a more institutional and normative framework, instrumentalizing the conspiratorial framework only during specific moments of crisis to criticize the government.

Fourth, the conspiratorial discourse of the HDP and BDP is both broader in thematic scope and shaped by sensitivity to historical events that have influenced them, compared to other parties. The parties' rhetoric has focused on topics such as the Kurdish issue, interventions by international powers, election processes, unsolved murders, and security policies. The discourse used is often organized around allegations of secret structures within the state (deep state, parallel structure), the agendas of external powers, and the government's collaboration with these powers.

In 2010, it was alleged that some international powers nominated the AKP to implement their secret plans; it was argued that the Kurdish Opening was the only solution to prevent these international conspiracies and secret agreements. In the same year, allegations of elections and a genocide operation against the Kurds also came to the fore. In 2011, it was alleged that a secret deal was made between the army and the government, that the government formed secret special forces, and that it pursued a secret agenda; the concept of the "deep state" was frequently used during this period. In 2012, the Roboski Massacre was highlighted, and it was claimed that this incident was part of a planned collaboration between the army and the AKP. In 2013, it was alleged that an international conspiracy was formed against Öcalan, while in 2014, accusations were made regarding the deliberate administration of faulty vaccines to Kurdish children, the claim that representative democracy was a deception of the neoliberal capitalist order, and the cover-up of the Hrant Dink assassination. During the 2015 election process, the overcoming of the election threshold, the dismantling of traps, the exposure of dark murders, the government's psychological warfare plans, and the Special Gladio structure were prominent in the discourse. In 2017, it was claimed that Western imperialists wanted to instrumentalize the Kurds, that the government was creating obstacles to prevent the truth from reaching the public, and that the state of emergency was being used to cover up the government's crimes. In 2018, Rojava came to the fore, and it was suggested that foreign powers had hidden agendas. In 2020, it was alleged that the government was carrying out a

"malicious" plan to destroy Turkey, that the Suruç attacks were covered up, and that there were "malicious" and "secret" plans regarding the 2015 elections. Finally, in 2021, it was claimed that TÜGVA was a structure secretly organized to control the people, that there was a parallel judiciary, that SADAT was a secret paramilitary force, and that a parallel economy had been established.

These narratives allow the HDP and BDP to position themselves as targets of the state's exclusionary policies and to expose the invisible forces behind these policies. Conspiracy rhetoric intensifies at critical moments, particularly the Roboski Massacre, the Suruç attack, Rojava politics, and the election threshold, enabling the party to simultaneously feed into themes of victimhood and resistance.

This situation shows that the HDP and BDP's instrumentalization of conspiratorial rhetoric is linked to their efforts to position themselves outside the system and fight for legitimacy. In short, for these parties, conspiratorial rhetoric functions as a tool for producing a counter-discourse in the struggle against authoritarian structures; it becomes a discursive strategy aimed at mobilizing the public by exposing the opaque structures of the state. However, due to its infrequent use, it is understood that conspiratorial rhetoric is not a primary strategy for the CHP, but rather a reactive instrument.

Finally, the İYİ Party's conspiratorial discourse is more limited and low-profile than other parties, both in terms of frequency and content. Although the party's rhetorical line, which was included in the data in 2018, rose somewhat during its founding period, it has remained low in subsequent years. This trend is consistent with the party's strategy of positioning itself as a "reasonable opposition." Appealing to the center-right base, the İYİ Party seeks to maintain political competition within a more institutional and rational framework, adopting a more cautious approach to conspiracy theories.

The conspiratorial narratives used have mostly revolved around economic issues, election security, and media provocations. Themes such as the AKP hiding economic realities, certain global powers plotting against Turkey, and the government setting traps targeting the İYİ Party are prominent. Key words such as "curtain," "interest lobbies," "global companies," "scheme," and "game" are frequently used in this discourse.

Overall, it appears that the İYİ Party has limited itself to using conspiratorial rhetoric as a strategic and limited tool; it has employed such discourse during specific moments of crisis, but this language does not occupy a central place in its general discourse repertoire. This situation can be explained by the party's desire to be part of the system and shows that, unlike other opposition parties, it prefers a less confrontational approach to the system.

In the first stage of manual analysis, the main themes on which conspiratorial rhetoric is concentrated were identified. Figure 2 shows the distribution of segments coded according to political parties by topic (domestic policy, foreign policy/relations, economy).

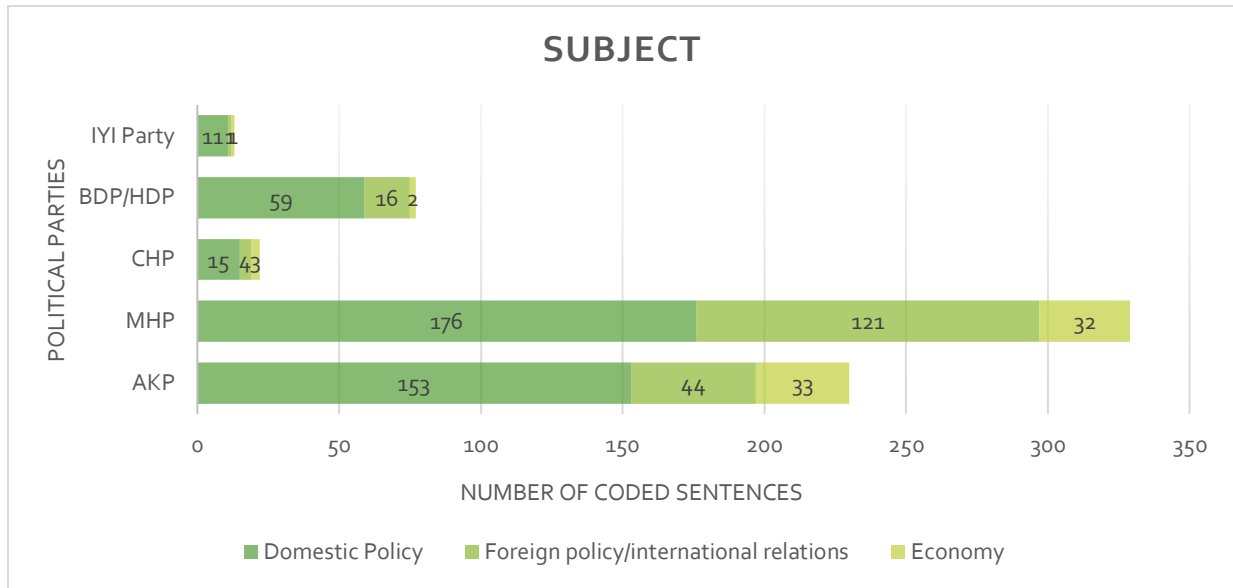


Figure 2. Thematic Distribution of Conspiratorial Discourse (Manual Analysis Results)

Figure 2 shows how the themes of conspiratorial rhetoric used by Turkish political parties are distributed by topic, based on the manual analysis of 129 group speeches. The most frequently coded topic for the MHP and AKP was "Domestic Policy," while these two parties also stood out in the themes of foreign policy and economy. The CHP and HDP, on the other hand, resorted to conspiratorial discourse in a more limited number of segments and were distributed mainly between foreign policy and domestic policy. It is noteworthy that the İYİ Party resorted to conspiratorial rhetoric only in a very small number of cases in the data and mostly focused on domestic policy.

This finding reveals that the MHP and AKP intensively use conspiratorial narratives, especially on domestic policy issues, while conspiratorial discourse is both less frequent and more scattered among opposition parties. It is understood that the ruling parties' conspiratorial rhetoric is used as an important tool in parliamentary speeches to both set the agenda and marginalize the opposition.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of topics for all parties without distinguishing between years, but when looking at the distribution of topics between years for the AKP and MHP, 2013 stands out as a turning point in the AKP's conspiratorial rhetoric. After 2013, particularly with the Gezi Park protests and increasing social opposition, there was a noticeable increase in the emphasis on foreign policy and the economy in conspiratorial discourse. While foreign policy and international relations issues were increasingly emphasized in the post-2013 period, economy-themed conspiratorial rhetoric came to the fore in a significant way after 2018. This increase reveals the dominance of the AKP's conspiratorial narrative built around the economy, especially during periods of intense economic crisis. Furthermore, the increased prominence of foreign policy and economic topics in conspiratorial rhetoric alongside the rise in authoritarianism after 2013 shows that the government systematically instrumentalized its discourse on both external powers and economic threats.

As for the MHP, it is observed that foreign policy and economic issues have become more prominent in the party's conspiratorial discourse since the beginning of its alliance with the AKP in 2016. Particularly in 2018 and subsequent years, there has been a significant increase in both foreign policy/international relations and economic topics in the MHP's conspiratorial rhetoric. This trend

shows that after its alliance with the AKP, the MHP began to share and reinforce the ruling party's discourse not only in domestic politics but also in its rhetoric on external threats and economic crises. In general, both the AKP and the MHP have undergone a transformation in the diversity of topics covered by their conspiratorial discourse and their focus on specific topics over the past decade, in parallel with the political conjuncture. While foreign policy and economic crisis rhetoric became more pronounced in the AKP after 2013, these themes also became an important element of conspiratorial rhetoric in the MHP after 2018. In both parties, it is observed that the content of conspiratorial discourse broadens and diversifies during periods of political crisis and economic hardship.

Figure 3 below compares the motivations behind the conspiratorial discourse used in the group speeches of the five major political parties. The graph presents the percentage distribution of conspiratorial statements coded based on six fundamental motivations for each party.

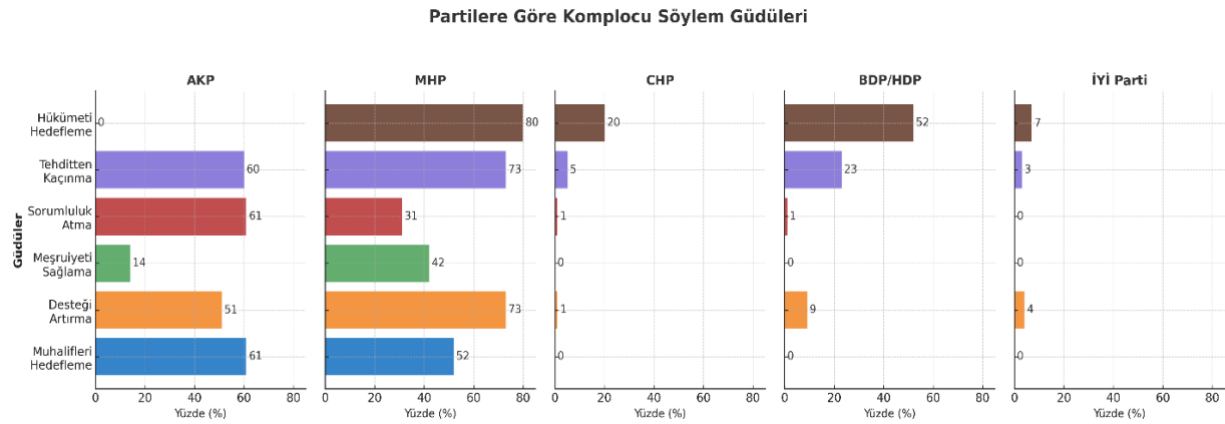


Figure 3. Motivations for Conspiracy Theories by Party

According to Figure 3, although the use of conspiratorial discourse in the AKP and MHP is based on a wide variety of motivations, purposes such as "targeting opponents," "increasing support," "avoiding threats," and "shifting responsibility" are at the forefront for the AKP. In the MHP, the most dominant motive is "targeting the government," and this motive was particularly evident before the People's Alliance. In contrast, it is noteworthy that conspiratorial discourse is much more limited and low-profile in opposition parties. In the CHP and İYİ Party, no meaningful motivation other than "targeting the government" and "avoiding threats" is observed; in the BDP/HDP, "targeting the government" and "avoiding threats" are relatively prominent.

The purposes of political party leaders in using conspiratorial rhetoric have changed significantly over the years. For example, prior to 2013, the AKP's main motivation was seen as "increasing support/attracting attention." However, with the rise of authoritarianism after 2013, motives such as "targeting opponents," "shifting blame," and "avoiding threats" came to the fore in conspiratorial discourse. In the MHP's group speeches, while the most dominant motivation before the People's Alliance was "targeting the government," after the alliance, motives such as "targeting the opposition" and "increasing support" began to appear more frequently. After the July 15 coup attempt, both the aims of "shifting responsibility" and "establishing legitimacy" were observed to have increased significantly.

Below, Figure 4 visualizes which actors political parties accuse when using conspiratorial rhetoric.

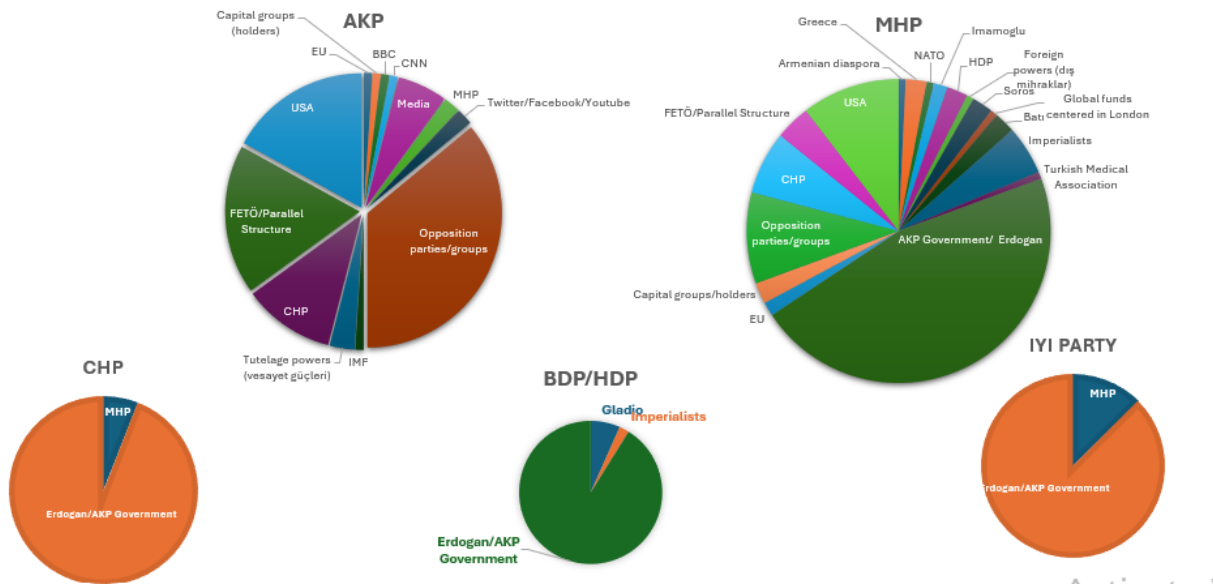


Figure 4. Actors Targeted in Political Parties' Conspiracy Theories

Analyses show that the actors blamed vary significantly depending on whether they are in power or in opposition. The groups most frequently targeted in the AKP's conspiratorial discourse are opposition parties and groups. In addition, FETÖ/Parallel Structure, the US, CHP, and capital groups have also been frequently blamed. It is noteworthy that the media, social media platforms, and various international actors also feature prominently in the AKP's discourse.

In the MHP's conspiratorial rhetoric, the AKP government and Erdoğan are primarily targeted, while opposition parties, the CHP, FETÖ/Parallel Structure, and actors such as the US are also significantly blamed. The Armenian diaspora, Greece, NATO, international funds, and actors such as the HDP also come to the fore in the MHP's discourse from time to time.

The trend is clear among opposition parties; almost all the CHP and İYİ Party's conspiratorial rhetoric is directed at Erdoğan and the AKP government. The MHP has sometimes joined the CHP in these accusations. The BDP/HDP, on the other hand, has mostly blamed Erdoğan/the AKP government, rarely including Gladio, imperialists, and foreign powers as part of its conspiracy rhetoric. In general, while the ruling AKP targets a diverse and broad group of actors, opposition parties have directed their conspiracy accusations more narrowly, mostly at the government. This picture reveals that conspiracy rhetoric is used as a tool that fuels political polarization and that targets differ significantly depending on political position.

Although this pattern of usage is not evident throughout the years, data reveals a significant pattern when examining changes over time: The number of actors accused in conspiratorial rhetoric has increased noticeably during challenging periods, particularly coinciding with the ruling bloc's

authoritarian consolidation process, economic crises, mounting criticism, and social protests. This situation can be said to be based on the government instrumentalizing conspiratorial discourse to evade responsibility and establish legitimacy. While conspiratorial discourse in the AKP's group speeches before 2013 largely targeted only opposition parties and the CHP, after 2013, all actors (the US, the EU, FETÖ, the media, capital groups, social media platforms, etc.) began to be targeted.

In the MHP's conspiratorial discourse, the accused actors include a wide range of actors such as the AKP government, the European Union, the US, the Armenian diaspora, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Soros, the HDP, Greece, the West, global funds, George Soros, imperialists, capital groups, and the Turkish Medical Association. The actors most frequently targeted in the MHP's rhetoric are the AKP government and Erdoğan. Before the People's Alliance, the MHP's conspiratorial rhetoric targeted almost exclusively the AKP, the US, and the HDP, but after the alliance, all other actors began to feature heavily in the conspiratorial rhetoric.

This change demonstrates that political parties rationally adapt their conspiracy rhetoric to suit their interests and that both the diversity and intensity of this rhetoric increase during periods of political crisis; it also points to the function of this rhetoric in evading responsibility and constructing legitimacy.

Manual analysis findings show that conspiratorial rhetoric in Turkish politics is largely based on the division between the ruling party and the opposition in terms of subject, purpose, and target actors. It has been observed that in the AKP and MHP, conspiratorial discourse is produced in a systematic and strategic manner, particularly in the areas of domestic policy, foreign policy, and the economy, and is often used proactively to set the agenda, marginalize the opposition, deepen social polarization, and evade responsibility during periods of crisis. While the ruling parties embrace this rhetoric as a rational political tool and part of a comprehensive communication strategy, in opposition parties, particularly the CHP and İYİ Party, conspiratorial discourse is used in a much more limited, scattered, and essentially reactive manner, motivated by a desire to respond to or defend against the government.

For example, it has been determined that the use of conspiratorial rhetoric in the BDP/HDP rises significantly during periods of increased pressure and existential threats against the Kurdish political movement, while in the CHP, this discourse occasionally comes to the fore in parallel with increasing authoritarianism and pressure on the party. In other words, opposition parties predominantly employ conspiratorial rhetoric in a defensive position, as a response to the ruling party's discourse of pressure and threat. In contrast, the AKP and MHP systematically instrumentalize conspiratorial rhetoric not only for defense, but also for attack, mobilization, and social control.

Finally, it is observed that the diversity and number of actors accused by the ruling bloc parties have increased over time, and that the content of conspiratorial discourse has expanded further, especially during periods of crisis and polarization. This pattern reveals that conspiratorial rhetoric has become a rationally designed, institutional political tool and legitimacy-building strategy, especially for the ruling bloc. The opposition, on the other hand, uses this discourse primarily reactively, as a response to existing pressures and authoritarianism, and mostly directed at the government. Consequently, conspiratorial rhetoric has become an integral part of not only moments of crisis but also everyday

political communication in Turkish politics; it has institutionalized as a political strategy that reinforces the polarization dynamic shaped by the ruling party-opposition balance and intensifies during legitimacy crises.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively reveals the function and transformation of conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics through both quantitative (dictionary-based) and qualitative analyses. The lexicon-based analysis maps the prevalence and temporal trajectory of conspiratorial rhetoric in party group speeches between 2003 and 2022, while the manual analysis reveals the contextual depth, aims, and targets of this discourse. The findings show that the MHP and AKP, in particular, used conspiratorial rhetoric systematically and strategically during periods of economic crisis and threat, and that this discourse has become an institutional part of politics over time. In opposition parties, conspiratorial rhetoric was found to be more limited, mostly targeting the government, and more reactive in nature. When the findings obtained through both methods are brought together, it becomes apparent that conspiratorial discourse in Turkey has increasingly become the normal language of politics, not only during times of crisis; it has been instrumentalized by the ruling parties to reinforce their legitimacy, criminalize their rivals, and deepen social polarization through an "us and them" distinction. Furthermore, the motivation of leaders to use conspiratorial rhetoric and the diversity of targeted actors have increased during periods of deepening authoritarianism and rising social tension.

Consequently, the integration of automated and manual analyses reveals that conspiratorial discourse in Turkish politics is not merely a rare coincidence or a reactive defense mechanism but has increasingly become a central and multifunctional governing strategy. What is particularly noteworthy here is that the analyzed texts are parliamentary group speeches, which are expected to be quite formal and normative and closed to conspiracy rhetoric. Nevertheless, the fact that conspiratorial discourse has found a place as a consistent and recurring practice over the years, even on these institutional and public platforms, indicates that this rhetoric has become a routine and legitimate tool in political communication. Consequently, conspiratorial rhetoric is no longer a discourse specific to extraordinary or crisis periods; it has become a fundamental element accompanying democratic decline, fueling polarization, and settling at the center of politics. In today's world, where polarization and democratic erosion have increased to such an extent, it is thought-provoking that conspiracy theories exist in this way even in the official language of power, and there is a particular need for political leaders to work more on conspiratorial rhetoric in the context of democracy.

Although these findings are noteworthy, they should be evaluated alongside various limitations. First, although the dataset used in the analysis spans 20 years, the total number of observations is limited ($N = 69$) because it includes only five parties at the annual level for OLS analyses. This may have reduced statistical power, particularly in interactive models, and limited the significance of some effects. Second, although the conspiratorial discourse measure used in the study is based on a manually developed lexicon, there is no comprehensive and universally accepted lexicon in this field. Therefore, the keywords used in the measurement were manually determined in a context-sensitive manner. Although developed with a systematic approach, the rhetorical context may not have been adequately captured in some cases. Third, the analyses are based solely on annual averages at the party level. Intra-speech diversity, tone of discourse, and differences at the actor level (e.g., leadership

change) fall outside the scope of these models. Finally, the contextual variables used in the study (economic crisis, threat, election, etc.) have been coded in a binary manner. Analyses conducted without considering the intensity, type, and duration of these variables may overlook some complex interactions. For example, not all crises or threats may be of equal intensity.

Despite these limitations, the study presents systematic findings on how conspiratorial rhetoric in Turkey relates to inter-party differences and contextual conditions. It is one of the contributions that reveals the partisan and contextual patterns of conspiratorial discourse in Turkey. In particular, it contributes to the literature by showing how this discourse is strategically used by institutional actors during times of crisis. It shows that conspiratorial rhetoric has evolved over time from a marginal rhetoric to an established and institutionalized form of discourse that has been adopted by mainstream parties.

One of the strengths of the study is that it identifies and analyzes conspiratorial discourses in official, transparent, and controlled spaces such as parliamentary group speeches. In this respect, it explores the role of conspiratorial rhetoric in politics not only through extreme examples on social media or marginal actors, but also through mainstream political actors at the parliamentary level. The findings of this study show that the use of conspiratorial rhetoric by elected leaders—even in official parliamentary speeches—is alarming in terms of the social fabric of democracy and the meaning of political representation. Conspiracy rhetoric does not merely provide a momentary political advantage; it undermines citizens' trust in politics, their belief in democratic institutions, and the role of individuals in public life.

Representative democracy relies on citizens voluntarily delegating political power to representatives. However, these findings show that when parties and leaders who come to power through democratic means resort to conspiratorial discourse to strengthen their legitimacy, they erode the essence of the regime they represent—namely, the political plane built on truth, trust, and social peace. The transformation of conspiracy rhetoric into a tool that drives democratic governance toward authoritarianism and social consensus toward polarization jeopardizes one of democracy's most fundamental promises: responsible, transparent, and accountable governance. Even more thought-provoking is the fact that leaders who derive their legitimacy from democracy itself, through fair and free elections, are eroding the rules of this system with their own hands and creating a political atmosphere in which a sense of reality is replaced by suspicion, distrust, and anger.

In a world where democracy is intended to be established as "the only game we play" and where alternative political orders are expected to lose their legitimacy, the resort of elected leaders to conspiracy narratives that polarize society and manipulate citizens with suspicion undermines the existential foundations of democracy, blurring the ontological meaning of representation and undermining the legitimacy of the democratic regime. These findings point to the need to reconsider the fragility of today's democracies and to examine the societal implications of these discourses more deeply.

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Güventürk Görgülü*

An Infodemic Constructed Around Security Rhetoric: CHP's Television News and Social Media Coverage of "Collaboration with Terrorism" During the 2023 Election Process

Abstract

This paper examines a disinformation strategy allegedly implemented by the ruling People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) during the presidential and parliamentary elections held on May 14 and 28, 2023, within the framework of the concept of "infodemic" brought about by the digital age. Infodemic, defined by the World Health Organization as the excessive circulation of information that is partially false and partially true, which hinders access to reliable information during a crisis, is examined in this study within a political context. The report is based primarily on the WHO's definition of infodemic and Wardle and Derakhshan's framework of "information disorder." It also draws on data and findings from the report "Those Left Outside the Circle: Big Data Analysis of the 2023 Elections in Turkey," supported by the Etkiniz EU project. The research focuses on the ruling coalition's strategy of accusing the main opposition of "supporting terrorism" and "collaborating with terrorism" through its "counter-terrorism" and "national security" rhetoric, against the backdrop of social issues such as rising inflation and the inadequate response to the major earthquakes in February 2023. The methodology involved big data analysis of television news broadcasts (ATV, HalkTV, Habertürk) and social media (Twitter/X) content during the election period, as well as discourse and content analysis based on natural language processing (NLP). Additionally, political party election manifestos were examined. The findings reveal that the main opposition party CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and the HDP are systematically linked to "terrorism" in ATV's prime time news broadcasts and social media posts, particularly those close to the government. This language was found to reflect the themes of the AK Party's security-focused election manifesto and to have an emotionally manipulative, negative, and offensive tone. While HalkTV has been seen to support the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı), Habertürk has adopted a more neutral approach. In particular, the sudden cessation of negative and offensive rhetoric targeting Kurds and the HDP on Twitter following the first round of elections on May 14 provides strong evidence that this disinformation campaign is the product of a strategic and institutionally organized effort. In conclusion, the 2023 election process has been a striking example of an infodemic that served to systematically produce and spread disinformation, criminalize the political opposition, and steer public opinion toward fear and polarization. This situation has led to the narrowing of the democratic public sphere.

Keywords

information disorder, 2023 Turkish elections, disinformation in election campaigns, TV news analysis, terrorism discourse in elections

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Introduction

In today's digital age, the radical transformation of the ways in which information is accessed and shared has brought with it new problems of information pollution, such as "infodemic." The World Health Organization (WHO) defines infodemic as the excessive circulation of information, some of which is false and some of which is true, that makes it difficult to access reliable information during a crisis. This situation becomes an urgent problem during times of crisis that create uncertainty, such as natural disasters, epidemics, political unrest, and terrorist incidents, due to the concentration of misinformation (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp. 4–5).

However, the issue has not remained limited to moments of crisis but has increasingly become a part of everyday politics and even daily life. What was once described as 'fake news' has come to be defined within the umbrella concept of 'information disorder,' developed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) based on the criteria of intent and veracity (i.e., their distinction between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation). The notion of fake news has proven inadequate to capture today's information ecosystem. (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 8).

This paper investigates the claim that the government implemented a communication strategy based on the spread of information disorder during the presidential and parliamentary elections held on May 14, 2023, in Turkey, followed by the second round of presidential elections on May 28, in which the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti)-led People's Alliance secured a majority vote and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected as president. However, before presenting the research findings, it is important to recall the economic and political environment in Turkey in the run-up to the 2023 elections, as this will provide a better understanding of the claim and the findings in question.

Background and Methodology

As the 2023 elections approached, economic and social problems caused by rising inflation had grown significantly. The social backlash caused by the inadequate response to the earthquakes that devastated the provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Malatya, Gaziantep, Osmaniye, Kilis, and Adıyaman in February was putting considerable pressure on the People's Alliance.

During this process, society was polarized into two major parts: the Nation Alliance, led by the CHP, and the People's Alliance, led by the AK Party and MHP. These two alliances represented two different political approaches in their election campaigns. The main arguments of the CHP and the Nation Alliance during the election process were based on the economy, corruption, and justice. The strategy of the AK Party and the People's Alliance was built around the themes of "fighting terrorism," "national security," and "a strong Turkey." However, the most striking feature of the People's Alliance's election campaign was its accusation that the opposition, particularly the CHP, was "supporting terrorism" and "collaborating with terrorists." Thus, the People's Alliance positioned the entire opposition in direct opposition to its own security-oriented rhetoric.

Table 1. 2023 Presidential election results, vote counts, and percentages.

Candidates	14 May 2023		28 May 2023	
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	27.133.849	%49,52	27.834.589	%52,18
Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu	24.595.178	%44,88	25.504.724	%47,82
Muharrem İnce	235.783	%0,43	-	-
Sinan Oğan	2.831.239	%5,17	-	-

Our content and discourse analysis of television news bulletins and social media during the election process reveals evidence of disproportionate "terrorism" accusations against the opposition by the ruling party. The data and tables shared in this study are based on a big data analysis conducted between April and September 2023, with results announced on October 9, 2023 ([BIA News Center, 2023](#)).

Conducted in collaboration with Bianet and the IPS Communication Foundation under the "Etkiniz AB" program with financial support from the European Union, the study examined the two-phase campaign process between April 24 and May 28, 2023. The primary objective of the study was to determine the extent to which groups perceived as disadvantaged in society were brought into the election agenda through political parties and the media. The goal was to contribute to raising awareness about the need to include groups that are unable to adequately influence the public agenda due to economic inadequacy, discrimination, marginalization, or other reasons—and whose demands are therefore not fully met or completely ignored—in the media and political agenda (Görgülü, 2023).

In the analysis, 72,754 sentences comprising the entire five-week bulletins of ATV Prime Time News, HalkTV Prime Time News, and Habertürk Prime Time News were scanned. A total of 326,936 tweets were examined during the same period by tracking 150 keywords related to 12 disadvantaged groups and two events associated with these groups. The news bulletins and Twitter (now known as X) posts were subjected to discourse and content analysis using "Natural Language Processing" (NLP) methods. Additionally, to enable comparison, election manifestos of the AKP, Nation Alliance, HDP-YSP, and TIP were also scanned and subjected to content analysis (For details on the method, see Görgülü, 2023, p.41).

Monitored Disadvantaged Groups*		
Alevi	Hristiyan (Christian)	Mülteci (Refugee)
Yoksul (Poor)	Kadın (Woman)	Roman (Roma)
Engelli (Disabled)	Kürt (Kurdish)	Rum (Greek)
Ermeni (Armenian)	LGBTİ+	Yahudi (Jewish)
* During the 35-day monitoring period, 150 keywords related to 12 disadvantaged groups were monitored, and 38 more keywords were included in the analysis in the later stages of the study. You can access all keywords via the link: https://static.bianet.org/belge/rapor/2023_secim_izleme/anahtar-kelime.pdf		

Table 2. Disadvantaged groups whose visibility in the media was investigated during the election campaign

The reason for selecting these channels for analysis was that the research design was based on comparing whether there were differences in the agendas and language of television channels supporting the two opposing poles of politics and a channel claiming to remain neutral. Thus, HalkTV, which regularly uploads its prime-time news bulletins to its YouTube channel and supports the Nation Alliance, and ATV, which supports the People's Alliance, were selected as channels supporting the two opposing political camps. Habertürk, which is considered more neutral and represents the "mainstream" in the classical sense, was included in the sample.

The analysis was published under the title "*Those Left Outside the Circle: Big Data Analysis of the 2023 Elections in Turkey*." The study revealed findings regarding the extent to which disadvantaged groups were mentioned in the election manifestos of parties and alliances, the promises made to these groups during the election campaign, the extent to which the media covered these issues, and the visibility of the same issues on social media.

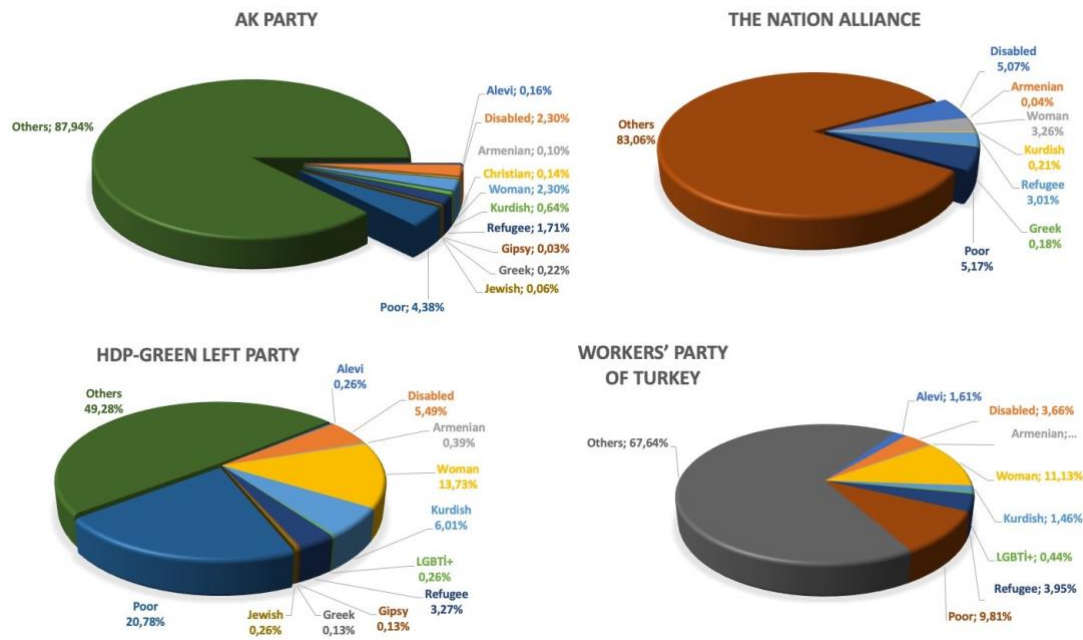
One striking result of the study was that the content and rhetoric of the AK Party and Nation Alliance election manifestos were largely reflected in supportive news channels. In other words, while Halk TV broadcast concepts emphasized in the Nation Alliance's manifesto, ATV Prime Time News repeated the AK Party's arguments. ATV Prime Time News' content and language went even further, taking a hostile tone toward the main opposition party and the Nation Alliance and accusing them of collaborating with terrorism. Because ATV news bulletins closely mirrored the AK Party's election manifesto, it is reasonable to conclude that equating the opposition with terrorism was a deliberate strategic move.

When we obtained the preliminary results of the research, we saw that the themes in the AK Party's election manifesto were not limited to ATV's Prime Time News bulletins but were also consistently carried over to Twitter. We summarized these results for Bianet.org under the headline "[The winning trio: Kılıçdaroğlu, HDP, terrorism](#)" and used the following statements: (Görgülü, June 26, 2023).

"According to the findings of the research, while HalkTV primarily focuses on Kılıçdaroğlu and the People's Alliance, the mention of 'terrorism' and 'HDP' alongside Kılıçdaroğlu in ATV news bulletins indicates that rival parties and alliances are being linked to terrorism."

Content of election manifestos

To make our findings clearer and more understandable, it would be appropriate to first compare the election manifestos of the AK Party, the People's Alliance, the HDP-YSP, and the TIP. Since election manifestos are limited in length, they were scanned manually rather than using any software. Both keywords related to the disadvantaged groups mentioned in the manifestos were scanned, and prominent themes were identified to determine the content of the manifestos.



Graphic 1. Weight of disadvantaged groups in election manifestos

1. The Nation Alliance's emphasis on law and transparency

The Nation Alliance's Joint Policy Agreement text consists of 2,822 sentences spanning 240 pages. The Nation Alliance emphasizes issues such as rights, justice, corruption, transparency, and oversight to highlight the rule of law. There are a total of 105 references to rights and freedoms, 63 to law, 27 to the judiciary, 27 to justice, 14 to liberty, 15 to freedom, 29 to fairness, 38 to equality, 26 to merit, 21 to ethics, 33 to corruption, two to theft, five to waste, seven to oversight, 82 to transparency, 21 to accountability, 22 to tenders, six to money laundering, 30 to drugs, three to favoritism, five to bribery, 19 to smuggling, 12 to violations, and 25 to rent-seeking (unearned income). These themes make up 23.95% of the text (676 sentences). (CHP, DEVA, etc., 2023).

2. HDP-YSP prioritizes women, children, and youth

In the HDP-YSP's (Peoples' Democratic Party-Green Left Party) 74-page, 765-sentence election manifesto titled "We Are Here, We Will Change Together," women are mentioned in 89 sentences, children in 71 sentences, people with disabilities in 47 sentences, youth in 29 sentences, and the elderly in 22 sentences. These groups, mentioned a total of 258 times, constitute 33.77% of the HDP-YSP manifesto, making them the most prominent issue addressed in the document. As such, the HDP-YSP manifesto is the party that most prioritizes the issues of disadvantaged groups examined in the study (YSP, 2023).

3. *TİP against capital and discrimination*

The 68-page, 683-sentence Policy and Stance Document of the TİP (Workers' Party of Turkey), titled "*There Is a Way*," focuses on "labor" and "discrimination," differing from other parties and alliances. The terms "worker" appears 33 times, "labor" 6 times, "minimum wage" 11 times, "retiree" 11 times, "union" 7 times, "unemployment" 12 times, "poor" 12 times, "income" 8 times, "workplace accident" 4 times, "capital" 25 times, "exploitation" 4 times, and "employer" 5 times. These 138 words account for 20.2% of the weight in the TİP's policy document (TİP, 2022).

4. *AK Party's agenda: Internal and external threats, greater security*

When comparing the statements, it is evident that the AK Party's statement adopts a security-oriented language that clearly emphasizes internal and external threats and advocates for a strong government and leadership to counter them. The AK Party's 2023 election manifesto, titled "*The Right Steps for Turkey's Century*," frequently refers to "terrorism and threats." In the 482-page, 6,254-sentence manifesto, the terms "global" appear 226 times, "terrorism" 114 times, "threat" 36 times, "war" 32 times, "attack" 22 times, "border" 26 times, security 163, stability 99, challenge 5, foreign policy 54, regional 101, leader 28, defense 103, military 35, diplomatic 29, peace 50, arbitration 15, coup 20, president 75, national 191, and party 140 times. The total number of sentences containing these 1,408 words, which indicate the presence of a security-oriented language, accounts for 22.51% of the AK Party's election manifesto (AK Party, 2023).

Content analysis of prime-time news bulletins

A comparison of the content of the prime-time news bulletins of three television channels monitored during the 35-day period when election campaigns intensified clearly reveals the differences between the channels that we mentioned earlier. However, what is more striking is that ATV Ana Haber mentions the HDP more than President Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu immediately after Erdoğan.



Figure 1. Word clouds of the three news channels

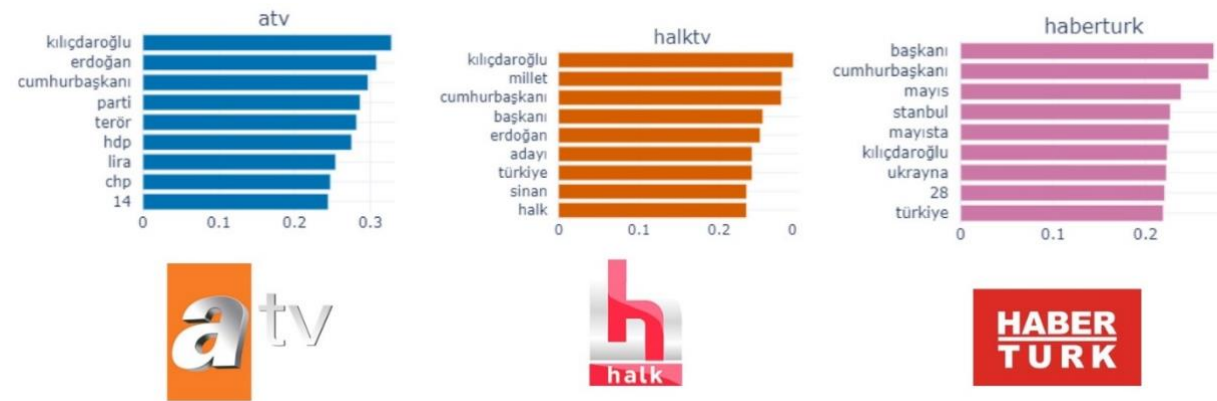
Looking at HalkTV's word cloud, the terms "people" and "Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu" stand out by a wide margin. While President Erdoğan comes after these, the news content on HalkTV bulletins revolves more around the political alliance it supports. The term "nation" in the word cloud visually highlights

the prominence of this content. Words such as "together," "important," and "Turkey" also stand out in HalkTV bulletins.

When examining Habertürk's word cloud, no meaningful words stand out aside from "Turkey," "Istanbul," and "May." While the term "May" is frequently mentioned in relation to the election date, the absence of any dominant party, alliance, or candidate name suggests that Habertürk is attempting to take a more neutral stance in its coverage of election-related news.

Returning to ATV, which openly supports the People's Alliance and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ATV mentions rival parties and politicians much more frequently than HalkTV does in its prime-time news bulletins. This difference is more clearly visible in the topic modeling and most frequently used binary and ternary word groups of the bulletins.

1. Topic modeling and word groups



Graphic 2. Topic modeling of news bulletins

Using a special algorithm for topic modeling, the differences between ATV's prime time news bulletin content and that of HalkTV and Habertürk become more evident. HalkTV's prime time news bulletins clearly cover themes that appeal to the National Alliance's voter base. HalkTV's language is shaped by themes such as "Kılıçdaroğlu," "Nation," "President," "Erdoğan," "Turkey," and "People." Later, depending on discussions related to the second round, the word "Sinan" (Oğan) was also added to HalkTV's language. While Habertürk primarily focuses on the elections, there is no obvious emphasis on a single individual, party, or alliance. The topic model consisting of the words "President," "President of the Republic," "Istanbul," "Kılıçdaroğlu," "Ukraine," "May 28," and "Turkey" indicates that Habertürk bulletins are prepared with a broader range of topics related to the current agenda.

When we come to the ATV prime time news bulletins, it is striking that, alongside the topics of "Erdoğan" and "president," there is again the most mention of rival parties and threats. The fact that "Kılıçdaroğlu" is in first place, along with mentions of "terror," "HDP," and "CHP" in the topic modeling, gives the impression that a certain strategic approach is dominant in ATV's prime time news bulletins. As we can see in the word cloud, the traces of this strategy are more clearly visible when looking at the pairs and triplets of words.

In the analysis of the pairs and triplets of words used in ATV News, President Erdoğan stands out prominently. He is followed by CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Fatih Erbakan, Chairman of the Renewal of Prosperity Party, Muharrem İnce, Chairman of the Homeland Party, and Meral Akşener, Chairwoman of the Good Party, also feature in the top 20.

The most frequently used pairs and triplet phrases on ATV	
• Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) • Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu parti terör örgütleriyle görüşüyor (Kılıçdaroğlu is talking with terrorist organizations) • Terör örgütü (Terrorist organization) • Yeniden Refah Partisi Başkanı Fatih Erbakan (Fatih Erbakan, Chairman of the New Welfare Party) • Selahattin Demirtaş'ın serbest bırakılmasını istiyorsanız (If you want Selahattin Demirtaş to be released)	• İyi Parti Başkanı Meral Akşener (Good Party Chair Meral Akşener) • Memleket Partisi Başkanı Muharrem İnce (Homeland Party Chair Muharrem İnce) • Cumhur İttifakı (People's Alliance) • Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı (Metropolitan Mayor) • İçişleri Bakanı Süleyman Soylu (Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu) • Millet ittifakının (Nation Alliance's)

Table 3. Meaningful expressions observed in the most frequently used pairs and triplets of words in news bulletins

In ATV news, the phrases "terrorist organizations" and "meeting with terrorist organizations" and "if you want Demirtaş to be released" are frequently repeated. The reason Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is the most frequently mentioned politician after Erdoğan is that his name is used alongside phrases such as "talking with terrorist organizations".

The most frequently used pairs and triplet phrases on HalkTV	
• Millet İttifakı'nın Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Presidential Candidate of the Nation Alliance) • Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan (President Erdoğan) • Millet İttifakı (Nation Alliance) • İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı Ekrem İmamoğlu (Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality) • Ankara Büyükşehir Belediye Başkanı (Mayor of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality)	• Sinan Oğan • İçişleri Bakanı Süleyman Soylu (Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu) • Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party) • Belediye Başkanı (Mayor) • Yeşil Sol Parti (Green Left Party) • Grup başkan vekili (Deputy Group Leader) • İYİ Parti Başkanı Meral Akşener (Good Party Chair Meral Akşener)

Table 4. Meaningful expressions observed in the most frequently used pairs and triplets of words in news bulletins

Examining HalkTV's pairs and trios of words reveals that the channel openly supports the Nation Alliance and its components. Unlike ATV, which tends to focus on its rivals, Halk TV covers news about the Nation Alliance. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's name stands out, and the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul, who are running the campaign together, frequently appear in the news. While President Erdoğan lags behind Kılıçdaroğlu, Sinan Oğan, who received a surprisingly high number of votes in the first round, also frequently appears in HalkTV bulletins. HalkTV also covers the Green Left Party and the Good Party leader, Meral Akşener. The Nation Alliance's rivals receive less coverage on HalkTV; however, the names of President Erdoğan and former Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu stand out.

The most frequently used pairs and triplet phrases on Habertürk	
• Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan (President Erdoğan) • Millet İttifakı'nın Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Presidential Candidate of the Nation Alliance) • Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (United States of America) • Birleşmiş Milletler (United Nations) • Ukrayna Devlet Başkanı (President of Ukraine) • Büyükşehir belediye başkanı (Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality)	• Yurtdışı oy verme işlemi (Voting abroad) • Dışişleri bakanı (Minister of Foreign Affairs) • Arap Birliği (Arab League) • Milli savunma bakanı (Minister of National Defense) • ABD başkanı Joe Biden (US President Joe Biden) • MHP Başkanı Devlet Bahçeli (MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli)

Table 5. Meaningful expressions seen in the most frequently used pairs and triplets of words in news bulletins

Looking at the pairs and triplets of words in Habertürk, it is seen that the frequency of the phrases "President Erdoğan" and "Nation Alliance Presidential Candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu" are quite close to each other. In addition to these two candidates, word groups such as "Metropolitan Mayor," "MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli," "Minister of National Defense," and "Minister of Foreign Affairs" are also frequently encountered in Habertürk bulletins.

The most striking feature of Habertürk, which is almost entirely absent from the other two channels, is that the bulletins cover not only domestic politics but also international developments. The frequent use of phrases such as "United States of America," "United Nations," and "U.S. President Joe Biden" indicates that Habertürk's broadcasting policy differs from that of the other two channels.

2. Comparison of the three channels' content

First, it should be noted that when examining the word clouds, topic modeling, and word groups in Habertürk's prime time news bulletins between April 24 and May 28, no dominant expressions similar to those in ATV and HalkTV are observed. The absence of any dominant party, alliance, or candidate names suggests that Habertürk has attempted to adopt a more impartial stance in its coverage of election-related news, opting instead to pursue a policy of balance between the extremes, despite

the political polarization. The diversity of topics covered on Habertürk also indicates that the channel is trying to position itself as "mainstream" and follow a broadcasting policy that maintains an equal distance from all parties.

HalkTV's prime time news bulletins, on the other hand, clearly focus on themes that appeal to the Millet Ittifakı voter base. The speeches of popular figures in the eyes of the voter base form the main theme of HalkTV. However, it is not possible to see a specific strategic approach in HalkTV's prime time news. While candidates and campaign managers are in the spotlight, there is no prime-time news bulletin that is consistent with the language of the party it supports, unlike ATV. The most important reason for this may be that the National Alliance does not have a specific strategic approach like the AKP or is unable to communicate its strategy to the public in an understandable way.

Among the three channels examined, we can say that ATV's prime time news programs are prepared with a specific strategic approach. The AKP has largely built its election campaign around a security-oriented discourse, with 22.51% of its 482-page election manifesto directly or indirectly addressing issues such as "terrorism," "threat," and "security." The emphasis on "terrorism" in ATV's news bulletins can also be linked to the AKP's election strategy.

When we watch ATV news bulletins, we can see examples that reinforce this strategic link. We can say that the security-oriented language of the bulletins is often visually supported, that national security is exaggeratedly emphasized, and that the main opposition party is similarly exaggeratedly linked to terrorism.

For example, in a news story on "defense industry" featured in ATV's [prime time news bulletin](#) on May 1, 2023, President Erdoğan's speech was quoted as saying, "First, he emphasized his determination to fight terrorism, then reacted to the support Kılıçdaroğlu received from Kandil." (The Kandil Mountains where the PKK military base is located) This can be cited as an example of the numerous reports emphasizing the connection between Kılıçdaroğlu and terrorism. In the report, President Erdoğan, wearing a military-style uniform, addressed the audience during the presentation of the domestically produced fighter jet named Kaan, while the fighter jet, Erdoğan, and the attendees of the ceremony were shown on screen in succession. At this point, President Erdoğan says, "My people will not hand over this country to someone who became president with support from Kandil," while the screen displays the phrase "Kandil will support them." In the continuation of the news report, Erdoğan, along with those present, says, "One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state" (Image 2).



Image 2

These examples show that ATV does not limit itself to offensive language in news texts but also uses a significant amount of positive and negative framing in news videos. President Erdoğan is frequently paired with motifs evoking power, such as domestic fighter jets or warships. The CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, are often shown alongside images associated with terrorism.

For example, starting at 37:30 in the May 1, 2023 news bulletin [linked below](#), images of burning cars in the streets and PKK leaders are shown in succession, accompanied by the statement, "After his dirty deal with the HDP, Kılıçdaroğlu has embraced not only the promise of freedom [referring to S. Demirtaş] but also the most extreme promises demanded by Kandil." At the same time, the phrase "CHP's Demirtaş and Kavala initiative" appears on the screen. Subsequently, the screen is split in two, showing Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu alongside images of explosions (Image 3).



Image 3

Disinformation disseminated by the government

When we compared the prime-time news bulletins of three television channels during the election campaign, we observed that the news bulletins of the television station close to the government consistently attempted to link rival parties to terrorism. We can say that this content disseminated through news bulletins can be evaluated within the scope of infodemic and, in line with the definition provided in the book *Infodemic and Information Disorder* (2022), which addresses the basic concepts of information disorder, it qualifies as "disinformation" (p. 10).

"Disinformation, which can be defined as the production and dissemination of false information with the aim of harming an individual, group, institution, organization, or state, is most notably characterized by the fact that the person disseminating the false information does so intentionally and consciously. (...) One of the most important points to note here is that the information produced in disinformation is produced with the motivation to cause harm."

In the same work, it is stated that "partisan media" can spread disinformation in line with the interests of the politicians and parties they support, depending on social and political polarization. Populist politicians may also resort to disinformation to strengthen their political positions and mobilize society (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 13).

In disinformation campaigns, types such as "distorted content," where real information is used in a misleading way, or "miscontext," where original and real content is shared with incorrect contextual information, are also frequently used to create misleading perceptions about political actors (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 19).

1. Actors, motivations, and the role of the media

Various actors and their motivations play an important role in the spread of misinformation and infodemics. Disinformation can be spread by independent or professional trolls, bots, fake news sites, conspiracy theorists, partisan media, politicians, and even foreign governments (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp. 13-15).

These actors typically act for political (increasing votes, discrediting opponents, creating false popularity), economic (advertising revenue, product sales), or sociological/psychological (gaining status, social acceptance) purposes. Especially during election periods, politicians may resort to disinformation campaigns targeting their own voters or opponents. In these campaigns, fake agendas and perceptions of popularity can be created through bot and troll accounts; this is called "astroturfing" and aims to create the impression of widespread grassroots support (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp. 26-29). Our findings, which show that the strategy of accusing the main opposition party of "collaboration with terrorism" is the product of a specific "strategic approach," are consistent with this theoretical framework.

The transformation of the media ecosystem is a critical factor accelerating the spread of misinformation. Digital media and social media platforms have increased the capacity for the spread of information disorder due to characteristics such as the lack of a requirement for content to be produced by professionals, anonymity, lack of editorial policy, and unlimited publishing space (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 73).

Algorithms, which aim to attract users' attention and increase interaction, enable the faster and more effective spread of false content that appeals to scandals, emotions, and negative feelings (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp. 82-83). This situation can lead to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are constantly exposed to content that aligns with their own views, thereby deepening social polarization and creating "parallel realities" (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p.75, 86). The offensive language identified in the prime-time news bulletins parallels the use of the terms "Kurd" and "HDP," which supports these dynamics. As we will discuss in the following pages, the offensive language and negative emotion clusters in the news bulletins are reflected much more intensely on social media.

2.Target audience and cognitive factors

The target audience's approach to information and cognitive processes also influence the spread of infodemics. People tend to accept information more easily if it is consistent with their own biases and worldviews (cognitive dissonance and selective exposure) (as cited in Erdoğan et al., 2022, p.39).

Fear and the urgent search for information during times of crisis and uncertainty make individuals more vulnerable to false and misleading information. "Motivated reasoning" shows that individuals can distort information by trying to make new information consistent with their worldview (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p.129). The fast-paced nature of social media can lead users to "cognitive miser," or finding shortcuts by thinking less, which in turn makes it easier to believe misinformation (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 61). Repeated exposure to information can create an "illusory truth" effect, leading to misinformation being perceived as accurate (Erdoğan et al., 2022, p. 206). Emotionally charged, sensational, or provocative content spreads more quickly and is more memorable by triggering emotions such as fear and anger. The emotionally manipulative and frequently repeated "negative

and offensive" content we identified in news bulletins provides examples of the use of these cognitive and emotional factors in political disinformation campaigns.

3. Conspiracy theories and trust issues

Conspiracy theories are an important component of infodemics and are frequently used in narratives constructed around security discourses. They are based on the assumption that powerful actors have secret plans behind an event or situation and offer simple, clear explanations for complex events. Discourses such as "collaboration with terrorism" have the potential to implicate an opposition political group in an "evil" conspiracy. Belief in conspiracy theories can lead to cognitive closure, causing misinformation to spread. Crisis and uncertainty, especially during times when feelings of fear and loss of control prevail, provide fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories. Historical narratives such as the "Sevr syndrome" in Turkey contribute to the spread of external enemies and conspiracy thinking, thereby strengthening the infrastructure of such security-oriented rhetoric (Erdoğan et al., 2022, pp. 113, 119, 123, 124, 131, 133).

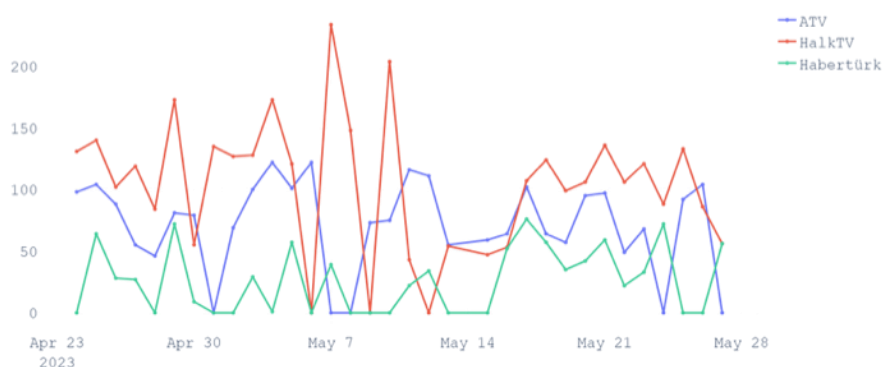
The production and dissemination of disinformation at an institutional and strategic level, particularly by directing public opinion along axes of fear and polarization, leads to the narrowing of the democratic public sphere. One of the most effective methods of doing so is the dissemination of disinformation using negative and offensive language.

The offensive language created by disinformation

As part of the study, an emotional analysis of the texts and the identification of offensive language were also conducted while analyzing the content of the prime-time news bulletins during the election period.

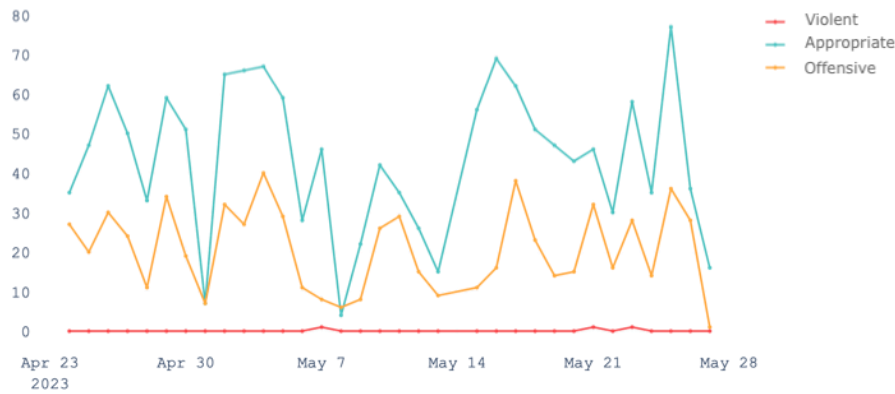
In the ATV Prime Time News and HalkTV Prime Time News bulletins, offensive language was detected at regular intervals depending on rising tensions and events. In Habertürk bulletins, offensive language was found at a lower level than in the others.

As seen in Graph-3, offensive language on ATV rises and falls at more regular intervals compared to other channels. During the second campaign period, offensive language became persistent over a 10-day period. On HalkTV, offensive language used at irregular intervals during the first campaign period became persistent in the second round.

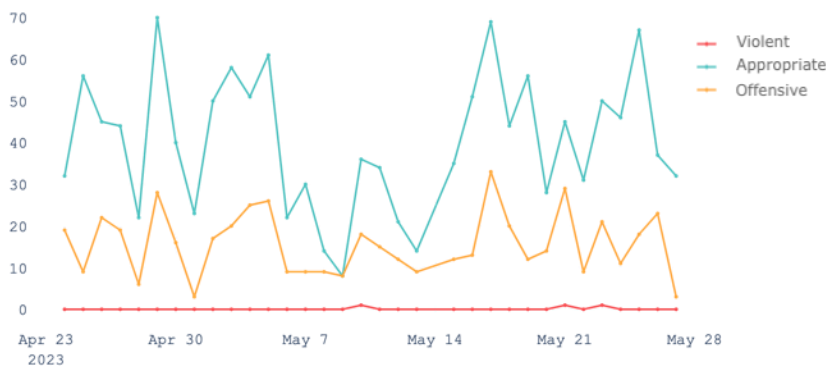


Graph 3. Daily use of offensive language in prime-time news bulletins

In this graph, the regular fluctuations in the use of offensive language on ATV, shown by the blue line, are quite striking from the start of monitoring on April 23. These fluctuations are parallel to the offensive language used for the keyword groups "Kurd" and "HDP Operations," as seen in the two graphs below (Graphs 4 and 5). This parallelism stems from the fact that "HDP" and "terror" headlines were the main agenda items in ATV's Prime Time News bulletins throughout the election period, which in turn increased the overall use of offensive language.



Graph 4. Frequency of offensive discourse related to the keyword "Kurdish" in the total of the three TV channels' prime time news bulletins



Graph 5. Frequency of offensive discourse related to the keyword "HDP Operations" in the total of the three TV channels' prime time news bulletins

The comparative table below, which includes keywords associated with negative and offensive language that have increased periodically in the news bulletins of ATV and HalkTV, reveals the differences between the languages of the three channels examined. An analysis of the keyword group "HDP operations" shows that ATV is the channel that uses the most negative expressions. ATV is also the channel that reports most frequently on Kurdish and HDP operations.

	Frequency	Frequency Ratio	Negative Frequency	Negative Ratio
Kurdish Group Total	2657	3.68	795	29.92
ATV	1,458	7.47	501	34.36
Halk TV	900	2.42	299	33.22
Habertürk	299	1.85	21	7.02
HDP Operations Total	2002	3.05	602	30.07
ATV	1014	5.19	345	34.02
Halk TV	702	1.89	224	31.91
Habertürk	296	1.83	33	11.15

Table 6. Frequency of occurrence and negative language comparison of the keyword groups "Kurdish" and "HDP Operations" across three channels

As seen in the table, the frequency of keywords in the "Kurdish" and "HDP Operations" groups reached 7.47% and 5.19% respectively on ATV, while the same rate was much lower on HalkTV and Habertürk. The percentage of sentences with negative sentiment within the total number of occurrences is similar on ATV and HalkTV, but much lower on Habertürk. Based on this table, we can say that HalkTV generally gave much less coverage to the Kurdish issue than ATV but used similar negative language. Habertürk, on the other hand, clearly stands out from both channels.

What happened on Twitter during the campaign period?

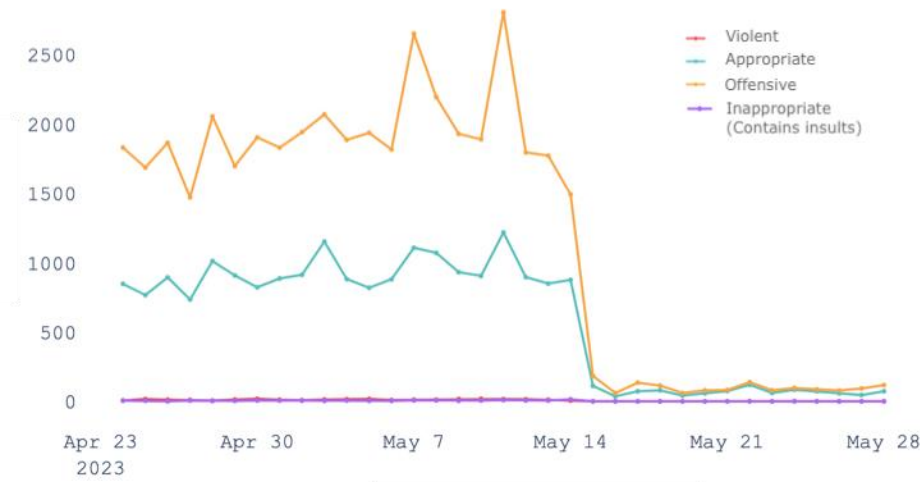
On Twitter, the platform where news, political, and economic issues are most frequently discussed on social media, we encounter a situation similar to that of news bulletins. The negative language used in news bulletins, which equates Kurds, the HDP, the CHP, and Kılıçdaroğlu with terrorism, is now being carried over to Twitter. Table-7 shows the number and percentage of tweets related to "Kurd" and "HDP" collected from Twitter between April 24 and May 28 using the specified keyword groups.

Disadvantaged Group	Frequency of occurrence	% of occurrence in collected tweets
Kurdish	155.851	47,67%
HDP Operations	77.942	25,70%

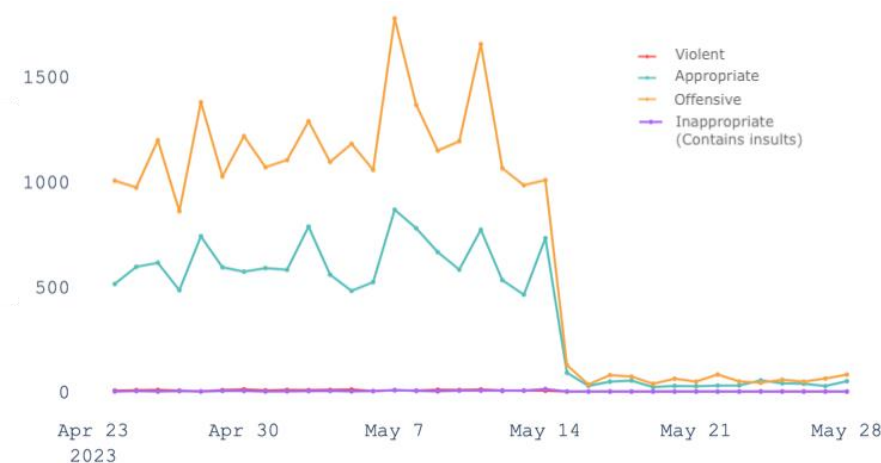
Table 7. Number of tweets related to Kurds and their proportions within the collected posts

The graphs numbered 6 and 7 below show the daily number of posts related to "Kurd" and "HDP," along with the extent of the offensive language used. On May 14, after the first round of the presidential and parliamentary elections, offensive statements about Kurds and the HDP were cut off abruptly. This situation stems from two reasons. First, the ruling party and its affiliated media outlets are appealing to Kurdish citizens to vote in the second round of elections. The second reason is that the CHP brought up the issue of refugees in the second round of the presidential elections. After this

date, a wave of hatred toward refugees emerged on X. However, this situation was not included in the analysis as it is not the subject of the report. (The increase in the number of posts related to refugees and offensive tweets during the analyzed time period [can be viewed by clicking here.](#))



Graph 6. Daily use of offensive language in posts related to Kurds on Twitter



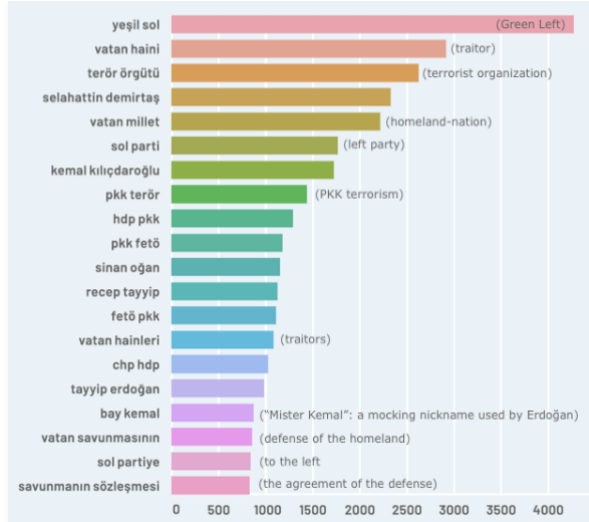
Graph 7. Daily use of offensive language in posts related to HDP operations on Twitter

Kurds are mentioned most frequently among all groups covered by the study. Negative posts on this topic also carry significant weight. When the keyword group "Kurd" is combined with the group "HDP operations," it is understood that more than one-third of the tweets mention both of these groups. When examining the sentiment of tweets related to Kurds in Table 8, it is observed that negative language accounts for more than half, with offensive language standing out.

Disadvantaged Group	Negative %	Offensive %
Kurdish	65,22%	84,55%
HDP Operations	67,38%	85,45%

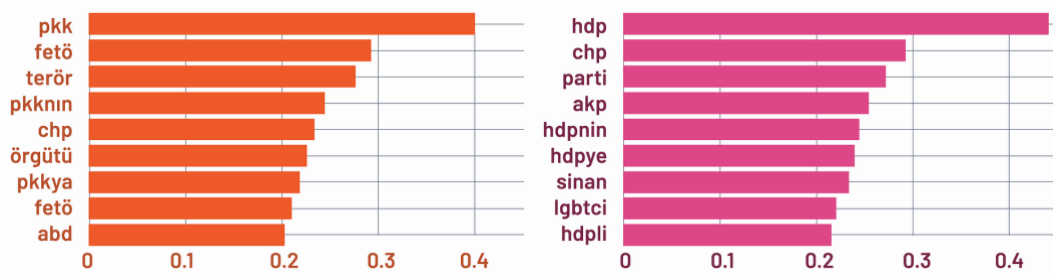
Table 8. Negative and offensive expression ratio in tweets related to Kurds

The most frequently encountered pairs of words in tweets containing tags related to the "Kurdish" group searched for on Twitter provide an idea about the content of the posts on this subject. The term "Yeşil Sol" (Green Left) appears first in the pairs, followed by the name of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Later, different "terror combinations" such as "HDP PKK," "PKK Fetö," (Fetö: Abbreviation for "Fetullah Terrorist Organization") and "CHP HDP" emerge. The presence of word groups like "traitor to the nation," "terrorist organization," and "nation and people" in the top ranks can likely be seen as the result of a strategy spanning from the AK Party's election manifesto to television news and X.



Graph 8. Most frequently used word pairs for the Kurdish group

In the topic modeling study conducted for the Kurdish keyword group, it is seen that two keywords bring certain concepts together in a striking way. In the modeling graphs below, we see that tweets related to "PKK" mention "Fetö," "terror," "CHP," and "USA." In tweets containing the keyword "HDP," we again see "CHP" mentioned, along with the term "LGBT," which was labeled as a "terrorist organization" by the ruling party during the election period.



Graph 9. Topic modeling of tweets related to PKK (left) and HDP

Conclusion

This study reveals how the government systematically disseminated its security-based discourse through mainstream media and social media during the 2023 Turkish general election process and how it constructed an infodemic architecture during this process.

The analyses show that the discursive link between the main opposition party CHP and the PKK was systematically reinforced, particularly in ATV's Prime Time News bulletins and on pro-government X (Twitter) accounts. In this context, it is understood that the language used in news content and social media posts is not only ideologically but also emotionally manipulative, with negative and offensive content being systematically produced and disseminated.

Data-based analyses show that media outlets close to the government synchronize the ruling party's discourse to create a kind of information architecture, which is then supported by emotional reactions from social media users, reaching the level of an infodemic. This reveals that not only the content itself but also the emotions it conveys are part of the manipulation process.

The complete cessation of posts related to Kurds and the HDP operation group on social media, along with negative language and hate speech, following the first round of parliamentary and presidential elections on May 14 supports evidence of the existence of infodemic originating from a specific source. The fact that posts related to Kurds and the HDP did not decrease in a curve after the elections shows that the posts made up to that date were not "organic" in internet language.

In conclusion, the 2023 election process provides a striking example of how disinformation is produced and disseminated not through individual actors or random misinformation, but through institutional and strategic means. This infodemic served to systematically criminalize political opposition, steer public opinion along lines of fear and polarization, and play a role in narrowing the democratic public sphere. Therefore, during election periods, media literacy, critical thinking, and the development of digital resilience capacity must be addressed not only as individual responsibilities but also as societal and institutional responsibilities.

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Kevser Salih*

Assessing AI in Political News Production: A Case Study of AI-Native News *

Abstract

This study explores the emerging phenomenon of AI-native news, focusing on NewsGPT a platform that claims to produce fully automated political news without human intervention. Through qualitative content analysis of 99 political articles published over a 10-day period, the research investigates the geographic distribution, thematic coverage, and source dependency of the content. Results reveal a heavy focus on the Global North, especially the United States, and a strong reliance on mainstream American news sources like CNN and Fox News. Plagiarism detection software indicates high overlap between NewsGPT articles and their original sources, with 94.2% of the sampled articles exceeding 50% similarity. The study finds that AI in its current form mirrors the biases and limitations of its training data, failing to provide balanced or original journalistic output. These findings raise critical questions about the role of AI in journalism, especially in the context of the post-truth era.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, political news, journalism, NewsGPT, media bias, post-truth, agenda-setting, AI-native news, content analysis, Global South

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Introduction: The Rise of Generative AI in Journalism

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) has brought about a significant transformation in journalism. Scholar David Caswell has compared this transformation to the invention of the internet or even the printing press (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). The use of AI in journalism is not a recent phenomenon. As early as 2014, outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Associated Press* used AI in domains like economics and sports reporting and even earlier, it was used in weather forecasting (Noain-Sánchez, 2022). These areas typically rely on well-structured databases that allow efficient information extraction, and where the priority is speed over depth of analysis (Matteo, 2019).

With the emergence of generative AI in late 2022 and the public release of ChatGPT, the scope of news types and journalistic fields influenced by AI has broadened significantly. For example, the tech news outlet *CNET* began using generative AI to draft articles but halted the experiment within two months after discovering that over half of the generated stories contained linguistic and factual errors, as well as instances of plagiarism (Sato & Roth, 2023). Similarly, the *Gannett* newspaper chain discontinued its use of AI-generated sports stories after its content, filled with awkward and unnatural phrasing, was widely mocked on social media (Wu, 2023). Nevertheless, experimentation with AI in generating both text and visuals has not ceased. Notably, two AI-driven news platforms have emerged that claim to use AI in every stage of the news production process: NewsGPT and Channel 1.

Research Problem

The term "AI-Native News" referring to news generated entirely from scratch by AI was coined by Channel 1 (AI Fast Cash, 2023) a platform slated for launch in 2024 (Channel 1, 2023). This paper adopts that term to refer to a new category of journalism envisioned by such startups. Unlike previous journalistic applications of AI, these platforms promise comprehensive coverage across politics, society, economics, and more. Rather than serving as a supplementary tool, AI here is positioned as the core mechanism of the entire news production system. This transformation could be as foundational as the shift to digital newspapers a change that took years to be adopted by traditional news organizations. For instance, the first digital newspaper emerged in 1980, but the BBC only launched its own digital version in 1997.

Though both *NewsGPT* and Channel 1 claim to rely fully on AI for news production, they differ in their declared objectives. Channel 1 promotes the idea of personalized news, aiming to tailor content to individual reader preferences a goal that is not new, as many traditional outlets already offer similar customization. NewsGPT, on the other hand, champions the concept of "Unhuman Truth", emphasizing the elimination of human bias from news production by excluding all human involvement, as explained in their own documentary (NewsGPT.ai, 2024).

The rise of these two platforms presents a unique opportunity for journalists and scholars to evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of AI-generated news, especially given that the founders of both platforms come from outside the field of journalism. Adam Mosam (an entrepreneur) and Scott Zabielski (a filmmaker) founded Channel 1, while NewsGPT was founded by entrepreneur Alan Levy. Their non-journalistic backgrounds raise important questions about the role of profit-driven tech

initiatives in shaping the future of journalism (Buckett & Yaseen, 2023). A concern also explored by scholars Anderson and Wiik, who frame it as a tension between editorial values and commercial imperatives (Andersson & Wiik, 2013).

More broadly, the adoption of AI in journalism is part of a top-down transformation led by major tech platforms aiming to create or optimize business models. This approach tends to emphasize AI capabilities while often neglecting the social consequences of adapting such tools into sensitive areas like journalism (Peña-Fernández et al., 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to assess the early performance of AI-native news platforms, using NewsGPT as a case study. Channel 1 is excluded due to its pending launch at the time of writing.

How Does NewsGPT Work?

In March 2023, entrepreneur Alan Levy announced the launch of NewsGPT as a 24/7 news network that relies entirely on artificial intelligence for every stage of news production. In a podcast interview (A Deep Dive into News GPT, 2024) Levy explained that the platform operates without any human intervention: the AI system is responsible for sourcing, selecting, drafting, and publishing news stories. As he put it, “We, like our readers, see the stories for the first time when they’re published.” The AI also generates an image for each news story based on its content.

Alan Levy, a South African economics graduate and tech entrepreneur, assembled a team of engineers and data scientists to build NewsGPT. “We have a language model expert from Cambridge and statisticians from MIT. Our team is made up of engineers not journalists. But they are brilliant, talented people,” Levy stated.

As an AI-driven platform, NewsGPT’s language model evolves over time, learning from user interactions. Unlike platforms that rely on OpenAI’s models, NewsGPT uses its proprietary model, named Sheldon. The site allows users to vote on whether a news story is factual or fake. The platform crawls the internet to source news from mainstream outlets, independent platforms, and even social media, employing a decentralized method of content gathering.

Levy’s decision to exclude human editors aligns with the theoretical framework introduced by journalist and scholar David Manning White, who coined the term “gatekeeper” in 1950 to describe the editor who decides which news stories get published (White, 1950). White noted that such decisions are often shaped by the editor’s experiences, mindset, audience expectations, and subjective judgment. Alan Levy stated in an interview that NewsGPT’s AI model fully assumes this gatekeeping role and that both he and his team read the stories for the first time only after they’ve been published (A Deep Dive into News GPT, 2024).

At the time of data collection, NewsGPT had been operating for approximately 14 months placing this research in the platform’s second year, a formative period for evaluating AI-native news networks. As of this writing, several of the platform’s features remained in development. These include:

1. **24/7 News Coverage**

NewsGPT streams a continuous news loop via *Rumble*, rather than YouTube (the latter

removed the platform for violating publishing policies). The news loop consists of 10–15-minute video segments broadcast repeatedly throughout the day. The stories in the live stream differ from those on the website and were not analyzed in this study.

2. **"Tomorrow's News Today"**

The platform promises that AI will eventually be able to forecast future news, akin to weather predictions. This functionality is reportedly developed by MIT statisticians.

3. **Documentary Film**

A 7-minute promotional documentary hosted on the site opens with the question, "Do you trust the news? 90% of people say no. Can AI change that?" The film discusses fake news and disinformation, asserting:

"But must we accept fake news, or is there a better option? How do we navigate a sea of misinformation and bias? The answer may lie in AI."

This video served as an important source for understanding *NewsGPT*'s mission and operating philosophy.

4. **AI News Section**

This is the main section of the site, where AI-generated news articles are published.

5. **Social Media Presence**

NewsGPT maintains accounts on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn, as well as a daily email newsletter. Due to previous policy violations, the platform does not currently operate on YouTube. Social content includes clips from the live stream, while the newsletters summarize daily website content.

Research Objectives

- To assess the effectiveness of AI in generating political news content by analyzing the early-stage operations of *NewsGPT*, based on its published data and output.
- To explore how the AI model used by *NewsGPT* selects, writes, and publishes news without human oversight.
- To examine the added value of AI in facilitating the pursuit of truth in journalism.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following central question:

- Can AI technologies produce unbiased news?

Related sub-questions include:

- Can AI-native news overcome traditional journalistic bias?
- How are AI-native news stories created on *NewsGPT*?
- Does the platform offer equal coverage of global regions?
- What value does AI-native news add to journalism in the post-truth era?

Literature Review

In recent years, numerous studies and reports have examined the integration of artificial intelligence into journalism and the increasing prevalence of its use in news production. Some of this research has focused on the social dimensions of AI in journalism, addressing the contexts in which AI-generated news is perceived and evaluated by audiences. A 2020 study (Lee et al., 2020), for instance,

investigated the factors influencing viewers perceived credibility of AI-generated news. The research linked this credibility to social context, individuals' social capital, and their media consumption habits framing AI as a social actor. The study concluded that higher trust among individuals and more frequent media interaction were associated with greater belief in the credibility of AI-generated news. This highlights that audience trust in AI-generated content is shaped not only by the technology itself but by broader social factors. Another multi-country study (Araujo et al., 2023), conducted in ten European nations found that trust in institutions and political orientation significantly affect public attitudes toward AI in journalism. Specifically, individuals who trust institutions and lean politically to the right tend to view AI-generated news more favorably. Interestingly, this study contradicts the previous one, finding that individuals with higher trust in traditional media were more skeptical of AI in journalism a discrepancy that warrants further attention.

In a study titled "*No Journalism Without Journalists*" (Peña-Fernández et al., 2023), researchers explored the existential challenges posed by AI to journalism as a socially grounded and human-centered practice. They argue that AI is not merely a technical product but also a cultural artifact, shaped by the values of its developers. Algorithms can be inherently biased, and their usage can be politically motivated.

Researchers like Yanfang Wu, Benjamin Toff, and Felix M. Simon have investigated audience trust in journalism in the AI era. One 2019 study (Wu, 2019), compared the credibility of automatically generated news articles with those written by journalists and found that readers perceived AI-written stories as more objective and trustworthy. However, a 2023 study (Toff & Simon, 2023) reached an opposing conclusion, suggesting that while readers acknowledge the use of AI, they tend to rate AI-generated articles as less credible. The contrast in findings may be attributable to the rise in public access to generative AI tools post-2021, a development that deserves further exploration.

Other studies have explored the anticipated transformations in journalism resulting from AI adoption. A 2020 study surveyed journalists and researchers about expected changes and highlighted opportunities such as content personalization, automation of routine tasks, and a potential return to journalism's core mission: asking the right questions (Opdahl et al., 2023; Ali & Hassoun, 2019). However, the same studies emphasized that AI still lacks advanced analytical skills and should remain under human supervision (Adami, 2023). Ethical concerns such as transparency in data sourcing and the mitigation of bias also emerged as critical considerations (Ali & Hassoun, 2019).

Several scholars have noted that AI has primarily been deployed in structured domains like weather, sports, and economics—fields where it performs well due to the objective nature of the data. Researcher Matteo identified these as areas of "chronicle journalism", where AI excels. He argued that while AI may surpass human journalists in such domains, it remains unfit for tasks requiring critique and commentary (Matteo, 2019). Many of these studies intersect in their attempts to forecast the future by analyzing current developments and comparing the evolution of artificial intelligence to that of the internet. This is a natural objective, given how new the field is and the hype surrounding it hype that many researchers consider to be exaggerated (Milosavljević & Vobič, 2019).

Despite variations in emphasis, much of this literature converges in its attempt to understand how AI might reshape journalism—often drawing comparisons to the early impact of the internet. This current study seeks to build on those efforts by offering an empirical case study of *NewsGPT*, an AI-native news platform that exemplifies the “machine heuristic” ideology. Its founders believe that AI outperforms human journalists in producing objective, unbiased content. This paper aims to evaluate that claim through an analysis of the platform’s political coverage—an area historically considered more prone to bias and thus more challenging for AI to master (Toff & Simon, 2023).

By studying a real-world platform, this paper tests the ideas and concerns raised in prior research. While it does not claim that NewsGPT is representative of all AI journalism, it uses the platform as a practical model for analyzing the current capabilities and limitations of AI in news production.

The platform NewsGPT adopts the slogan “Unhuman Truth.” The relationship between artificial intelligence and humanity can be understood in two ways: the first refers to the aspiration of AI to reach and surpass human intelligence, while the second reflects the rationality of AI that diverges from human rationality—its ability to “do the right thing, based on what it knows” (Russel & Norvig, 2002). This dual interpretation helps explain NewsGPT’s operating principle and its reliance on AI in news production. On one hand, it harnesses the rapidly evolving analytical and linguistic capabilities of AI, bringing it closer to competing with human journalists. On the other hand, it seeks to eliminate the human journalist’s tendency toward bias, and preference motivated by personal beliefs and emotions rather than logical reasoning. With these two ambitions, NewsGPT sees its AI model as the future leader in journalism.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on two complementary theories to examine the case of NewsGPT: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Post-Truth Paradigm. These frameworks were selected after reviewing prior scholarship on AI and journalism, the mission statements of NewsGPT, and the compatibility of these theories with the chosen research methodology (outlined later in the paper).

NewsGPT presents its operational model as a solution to the problem of declining trust in news. However, trust in news is not isolated from the broader sociological and epistemological dynamics unfolding globally—it is one of their clearest manifestations. If the core function of journalism is to deliver objective truth (Abuhamad, 2024), and if—as NewsGPT claims—“90% of people no longer trust the news,” then it is the concept of truth itself that is undergoing a profound crisis.

The term “post-truth” was named the Oxford Dictionary’s Word of the Year in 2016, following the twin political shocks of that year: the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit campaign. Its usage spiked by 200%, signaling a shift in how people relate to facts. In a post-truth world, emotions and personal beliefs override objective facts in shaping public opinion. Unlike terms such as “post-war,” the prefix “post-” here does not denote a temporal succession but rather the diminishment of truth’s relevance. Consensus over facts erodes, replaced by individual selections of “facts” that confirm pre-existing views (McIntyre, 2022).

These phenomena are by no means new, but their intensification has led to them becoming defining features of the present era. Social media platforms—which opened access to the public sphere and enabled the free and unregulated dissemination of information regardless of its source or accuracy—played a major role in accelerating this process. This development broke the monopoly previously held by institutions over the authority to publish and edit information. Among the greatest beneficiaries of this shift were politicians, who found in these platforms a new space for mass mobilization (McIntyre, 2022). This shift has been fueled by social media platforms, which enable the widespread dissemination of information without regard for its source or accuracy. The collapse of editorial gatekeeping has been a boon for political actors who use these platforms for mass mobilization. Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign was among the first to leverage social media at scale (Pew Research Center, 2024) ushering in a new era of unmediated political communication. Donald Trump exemplified the post-truth politician, spreading disinformation and undermining public confidence in the media’s ability to reflect reality (McIntyre, 2022).

In a podcast with *COVER* magazine (A Deep Dive into News GPT, 2024) *NewsGPT* founder Alan Levy spoke of this mistrust in traditional media and positioned AI as the solution: *“With satellite imagery, AI can easily verify what is true and what is false. One thing is factually correct; the other is not. AI can tell you that exactly 57,312 people attended a rally—this is the satellite image. That’s the unbiased truth. It becomes very difficult for a human to argue against that... CNN may not want to report a large crowd; Fox might want to. AI doesn’t care who pays for the ads or salaries. It writes what it sees. That’s the core idea.”* This statement underscores Levy’s belief that AI offers mathematical precision, absence of bias, and freedom from financial or institutional interests—making it superior to human journalists and traditional newsrooms. The AI does not describe crowds as “large” or “small”; it reports specific figures and lets data speak for itself. Levy’s argument mirrors core ideas from Agenda-Setting Theory and the Post-Truth discourse.

The idea of choosing to report—or ignore—specific events lie at the heart of agenda setting. Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the late 1960s, the theory posits that the media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about. Through editorial choices, the media influences public perception of issue salience. This selective emphasis shapes public discourse over time, especially during events like elections. However, agenda-setting theory does not suggest that the media invents falsehoods. It highlights how priorities are constructed.

The phrase “AI can say with precision that there are 57,312 people standing in the rally. Here is the satellite image. This is the unbiased truth. And it would be very difficult for a human to argue against it” refers to evidence-based truth—the kind that is losing significance in the post-truth era, where emotions increasingly dictate which facts people accept based on their prior beliefs, while disregarding others or even fabricating entirely baseless information (McIntyre, 2022). However, Levy also conflates bias with falsehoods. In the same interview, he says: *“If readers visit NewsGPT and read some of the stories, they may find some of them biased. But we have a feature that allows readers to vote if a story is fake or true. That feedback helps train the AI. This is crowdsourcing the truth.”* Here, Levy invites users to help refine the AI’s judgments. While this may seem democratic, it introduces the risk of manipulated input. Coordinated campaigns—or even bots—could flood the system with biased votes, teaching the AI incorrect lessons. This raises a critical question: Can user-based

validation mechanisms ensure the credibility of AI-generated news, especially in the absence of human editors?

It is important to note that bias does not always mean fabrication. Bias may result from the way a story is framed (as described by Framing Theory) or from prioritizing certain news over others (as per Agenda-Setting Theory). First proposed in the context of the 1968 U.S. election, agenda-setting theory explains how media priorities become public priorities (Maxwell & Sebastián, 2007). Because individuals rely on second-hand realities—through the press and broadcasters—media institutions effectively shape public consciousness.

Framing Theory, on the other hand, studies how the presentation of a story influences public interpretation. The chosen "frame" can guide meaning, assign blame, and highlight or obscure aspects of an issue. Researchers use this theory to analyze narrative trends and media bias across different outlets (Chong & Druckman, 2007). While both theories are relevant, this paper adopts Agenda-Setting Theory as the primary framework for analysis.

Journalism in a Post-Truth World

Numerous studies have addressed the challenges journalism faces in an era where the consensus on facts has eroded. This section offers a brief overview of key arguments in the literature, as a foundation for analyzing the role that platforms like NewsGPT claim to play in shaping a new vision of truth.

Researchers Asimina Michailidou and Hans-Jörg Trenz caution against viewing journalists as inherently closer to the truth than other actors. Rather, they argue that journalism is part of a professional field built on specific practices designed to give information its perceived legitimacy. Truth, they suggest, is not equivalent to information, nor is it a straightforward product of news production. Instead, it is the unstable result of applying professional routines—such as fact-checking and verification—to information that is inherently open to contestation. In this view, journalists serve as brokers of truth in a system where facts remain subject to challenge (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). This understanding highlights that journalism's credibility stems not from its products but from its processes. By contrast, NewsGPT proposes an entirely new model in which AI, rather than humans, performs all the roles traditionally fulfilled by journalists and media institutions. In this framework, the journalist is replaced by an evolving neural network and a proprietary language model.

Many scholars and journalists remain skeptical of this shift. In their paper "*Trustworthy Journalism through AI*," researchers argue that reliable journalism requires a balance between tasks fully automated by AI and those enhanced by human input (Opdahl et al. 2023). They cite the work of Rachel E. Moran and Sonia Jawaid Shaikh, who assert that technology should not be treated as an external force imposed upon journalism, but as a tool shaped by the values and needs of journalism itself (Moran & Shaikh, 2022). This divergence in views between NewsGPT's founders and the academic community is a central motivation for this study. It seeks to evaluate NewsGPT not merely as a technical innovation, but as a normative proposal about the future of news.

Methodology

This study is based on two types of data: primary and secondary.

- Primary data include information published on the *NewsGPT* website and content from Alan Levy's interview on the *COVER* magazine podcast.
- Secondary data were generated through a content analysis of the political news articles published on the NewsGPT site.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology, specifically content analysis, a widely used approach for studying various types of text including news articles, poems, websites, and even visual art. Academic Philip Babbie defines content analysis as "the study of any recorded form of human communication" (Babbie, 2014).

The study population consists of all news articles published on <https://newsqpt.ai>. The sample was drawn from articles published over a 10-day period (May 1–10, 2024). From this collection of 309 articles, 107 were identified as political news roughly 33.7% of the total.

The daily breakdown of articles is as follows:

- May 1: 84 articles
- May 6: 72 articles
- May 7: 11 articles
- May 8: 79 articles
- May 9: 34 articles
- May 10: 29 articles

(No articles were published on the remaining four days.)

Articles were classified as political either because the platform labeled them as such, or because their content clearly engaged with political actors or current political events worldwide. These 107 articles formed the unit of analysis.

The analysis was conducted on two levels:

1. *Geographic Coverage*

- Determining which global region each article covered (e.g., U.S., Gaza, Russia-Ukraine).

2. *Thematic Focus*

- Identifying the core theme of each article (e.g., U.S. campus protests, Holocaust-related issues, elections).

From the political articles, a random sample of 30 (approximately one-third) was selected for source verification using two primary techniques:

1. *AI-Powered Plagiarism Detection*

- Using the premium version of CopyLeaks, articles were scanned for textual overlap with existing web content using its "public scan" feature.

2. *Date-Filtered Google Search & Comparison*

- Each article was searched using Google’s date-specific filters to locate original or similar reports. These were then uploaded to CopyLeaks to compare and assess similarity or potential plagiarism.

By the end of this process, each article was linked to its most likely original source(s).

Results and Discussion

The findings from this study provide insight into both the geographic focus and thematic distribution of political news produced by NewsGPT, as well as the original sources used in AI-generated content.

Geographic Distribution

The political articles covered a variety of regions, including:

- The United States
- Gaza and the wider Middle East
- Russia and Ukraine
- Other global hotspots

An important question raised here is whether AI news platforms offer equitable global coverage, or whether they reflect existing imbalances in news representation a phenomenon long criticized in mainstream journalism. This analysis suggests that NewsGPT reflects rather than corrects these disparities, often focusing disproportionately on regions with already high international media exposure.

Thematic Categories

The thematic analysis revealed frequent focus on:

- University protests
- The Holocaust
- Electoral politics

The choice of themes indicates an AI-driven tendency to follow trending global topics, likely drawn from widely circulated online content. While this ensures relevance, it also raises concerns about algorithmic news homogenization, where coverage clusters around dominant narratives while neglecting underreported stories.

Source Attribution

From the 30 articles analyzed for sourcing:

- Many showed strong textual similarity to existing reports from mainstream outlets.
- A few included phrases or structures that suggest direct replication without citation, raising ethical concerns about plagiarism and transparency.
-

This contradicts NewsGPT’s claim to produce content entirely free from human intervention or bias. In practice, the AI appears to operate by curating, rephrasing, or adapting pre-existing stories sometimes without adequate attribution. The platform’s voting feature (“real” vs. “fake”) also opens the system to manipulation through coordinated campaigns, bots, or even AI-generated votes, potentially distorting its truth-learning mechanism. This reaffirms a key critique of AI in journalism:

while it may reduce some forms of bias, it introduces new vulnerabilities, especially when deployed without editorial oversight or accountability mechanisms.

Results

The content analysis results are presented through two tables and three figures:

1. Table 1 – Geographic Distribution
2. Table 2 – Thematic Distribution
3. Figure 1 – U.S. Topic Breakdown
4. Figure 2 – Original Sources Used
5. Figure 3 – Relationship Between Original Sources and Plagiarism Rates

Table 1. Geographic Distribution

Region	Total Number	Percentage
Argentina	1	1.0%
Egypt–Israel	1	1.0%
Germany	4	4.0%
Global	1	1.0%
Hungary	1	1.0%
India	2	2.0%
Israel	3	3.0%
Lebanon–Israel	2	2.0%
Palestine–Israel	5	5.1%
Russia	3	3.0%
Russia–Ukraine	6	6.1%
United Kingdom	1	1.0%
United States	68	68.7%
Iran	1	1.0%
Total	99	100%

The geographic distribution clearly shows that the United States dominates the coverage, accounting for 68.7% of all political news stories. No other region comes close. Russia and Ukraine come second with 6.1%, followed by Palestine and Israel with 5.1%, and then Germany with 4.0%. The remaining ten regions each appeared in only 1 to 3 articles, representing between 1% to 3% of the total.

Table 2. Thematic Distribution

Theme	Total Number	Percentage
Protests (mostly U.S.)	20	20.20%
Hezbollah	2	2.02%
Holocaust	8	8.08%
Russia–Ukraine War	6	6.06%

Theme	Total Number	Percentage
Elections	10	10.10%
Sanctions	3	3.03%
ISIS	2	2.02%
TikTok	1	1.01%
Internal Affairs	9	9.09%
Biden	3	3.03%
Trump	12	12.12%
Trump–Elections	3	3.03%
Trump–Protests	1	1.01%
Antisemitism	3	3.03%
Refugees	2	2.02%
IDF	1	1.01%
Israeli Victims	2	2.02%
Israeli Hostages	2	2.02%
Prince Harry	1	1.01%
Cybersecurity	2	2.02%
Artificial Intelligence	1	1.01%
Gaza	1	1.01%
U.S. International Relations	3	3.03%
Eurovision	1	1.01%
Total	99	100.00%

Among the topics, U.S. university protests, the elections, and Donald Trump dominate the content. These topics alone account for a substantial proportion of the total and are all U.S.-based, as shown in Figure 1. The next most frequent topics were internal affairs (9.09%), the Holocaust (8.08%), and the Russia–Ukraine war (6.06%). Other topics each appeared only 1–3 times, contributing between 1% and 3% to the overall distribution.

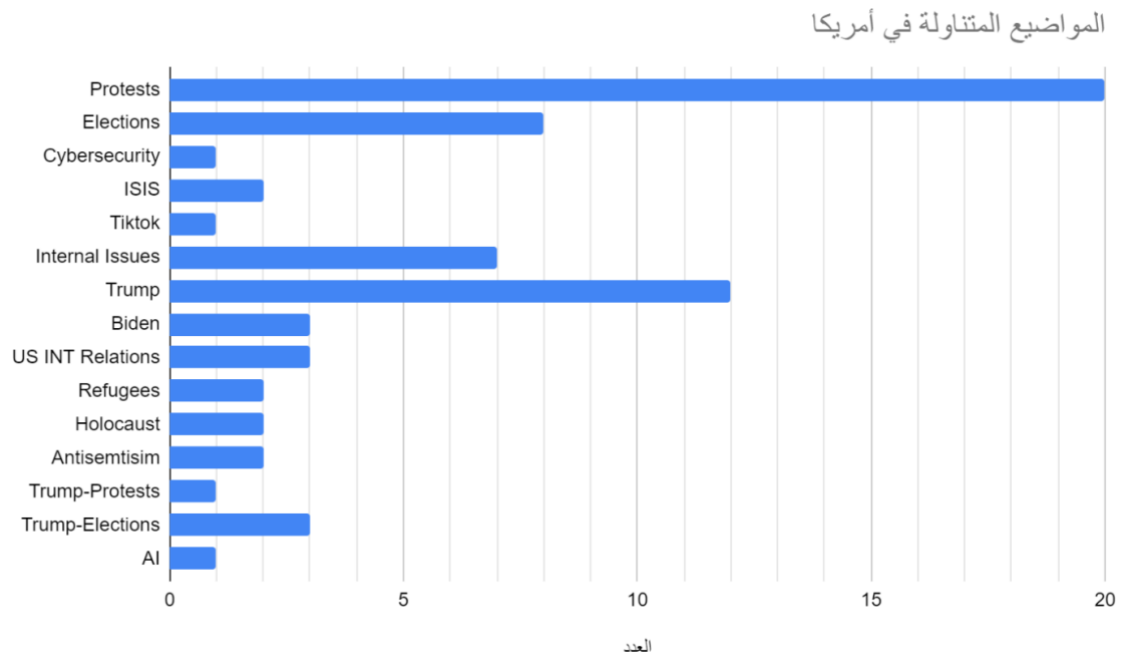


Figure 1. U.S. Topic Breakdown

The combination of geographic and thematic data points to a strong bias toward the Global North, particularly the U.S. Not only did the U.S. dominate the country distribution, but topics related to Western politics and society led the thematic rankings. Notably, while the war in Gaza received only one news story, themes like antisemitism, Israeli hostages, and Israeli casualties received much more coverage, despite the humanitarian crisis in Gaza at the time. Compared to the simultaneous Russia–Ukraine war, which accounted for 6.06% of coverage, the conflict in Gaza was largely underreported—revealing a significant skew in how NewsGPT prioritizes suffering and conflict in the Global North versus the Global South.

Source Verification and Plagiarism Findings

In the second stage of the analysis, I sought to trace the original sources of 35 articles randomly selected from the 99 political news stories in the sample. The reason for this step lies in the absence of visible source attribution on the NewsGPT platform: the articles are published with a headline and an AI-generated image, but no byline or mention of an originating source.

To identify the original sources, I used two tools:

1. CopyLeaks, an AI-powered plagiarism detection platform (premium version), to measure textual overlap and check for signs of AI-written vs. human-written content.
2. Advanced Google Search, using date filters and keywords to locate matching stories published before the NewsGPT versions.

Findings from Source Attribution

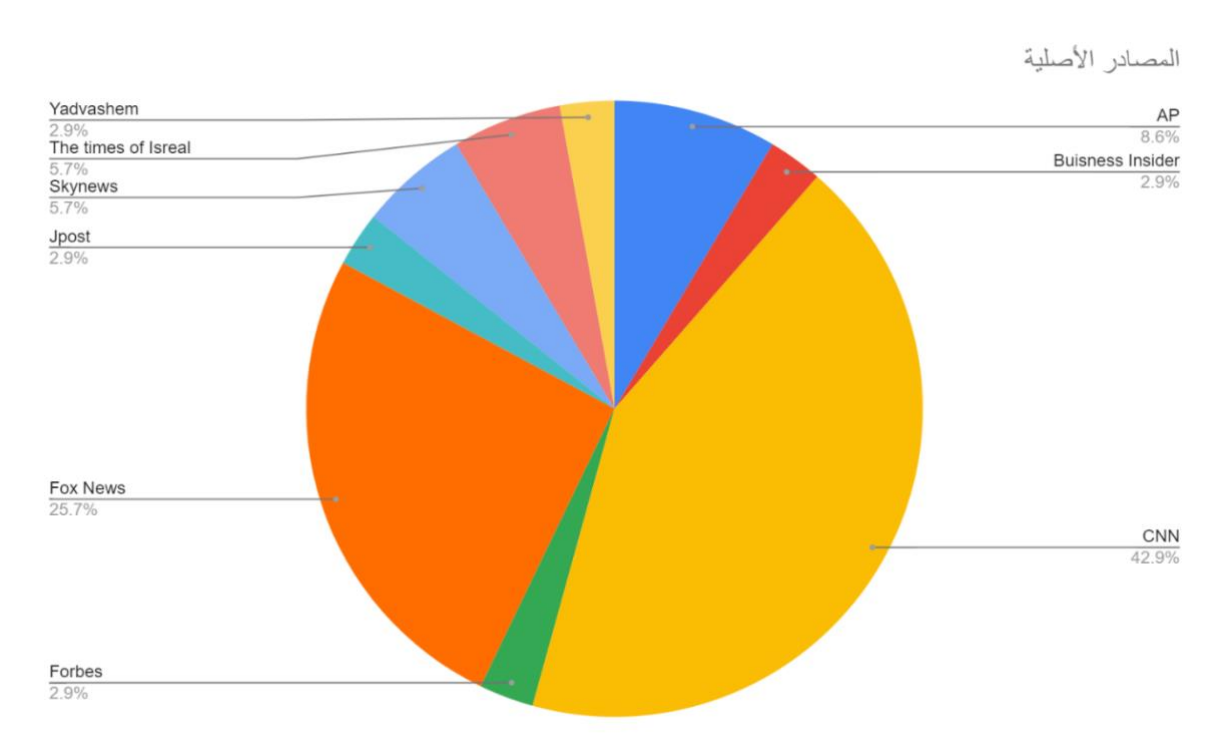


Figure 2. Original Sources Used

- 42.9% of the sampled articles were sourced from CNN
- 25.7% came from Fox News
- 8.6% were traced to Associated Press (AP)
- 5.7% were sourced from The Times of Israel

As shown in the graph above CNN and Fox News accounted for 68.6% of all detected sources. Importantly, none of the articles were traced back to media outlets based in the Global South. The results shown in the graph illustrating the original sources can only be properly understood when linked to the plagiarism percentages identified by the CopyLeaks tool, as presented in Figure 3.

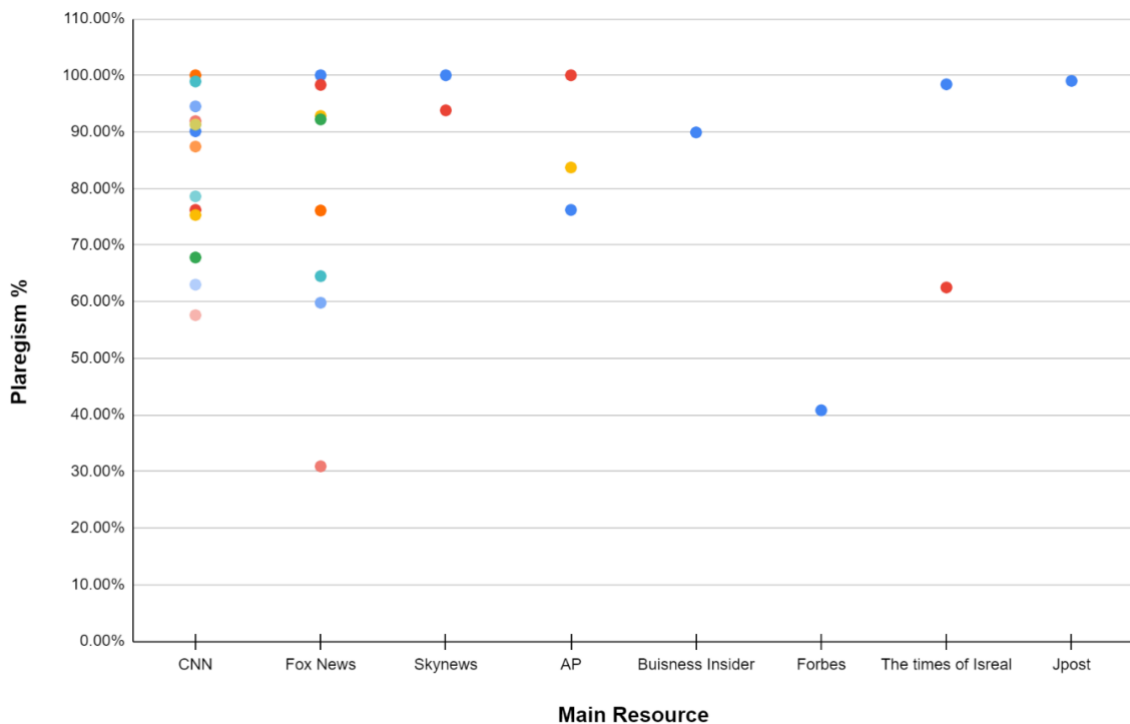


Figure 3. Relationship Between Original Sources and Plagiarism Rates

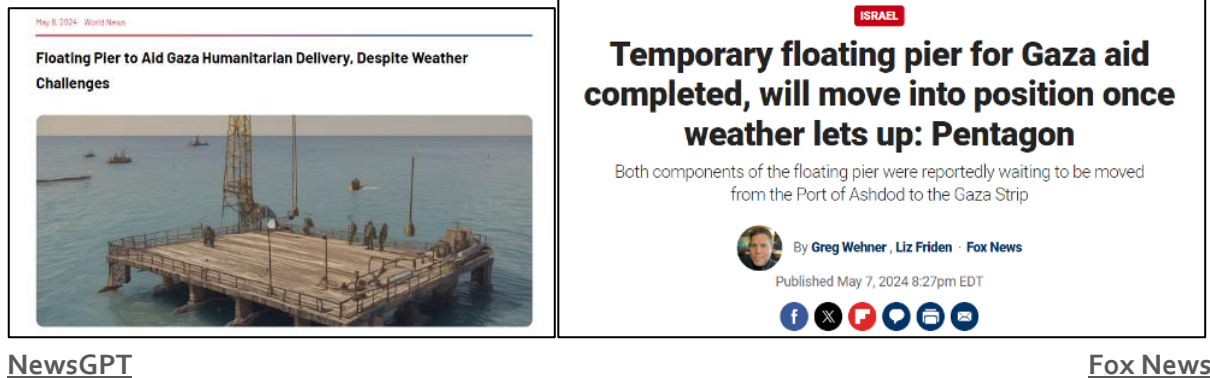
Figure 3 in the original study presents plagiarism scores for each of the 35 analyzed articles.

- In 8 out of 35 articles (~22.8%), plagiarism scores were close to 100%, indicating nearly word-for-word replication.
- 33 out of 35 articles (~94.2%) had plagiarism scores exceeding 50%.
- The lowest plagiarism score observed was around 30%.

Each dot in Figure 3 represents one article. These scores suggest that in many cases, the AI did not substantially rephrase or interpret its source but simply restructured the same content. Articles with near-total overlap appear to function as summaries or simplified rewrites of the originals. While it's difficult to verify whether every article relied on a single source, the high plagiarism rates suggest a pattern of dependence on one primary input per story. In these cases, the role of AI appears limited to text transformation rather than journalistic synthesis or interpretation.

Examples of Plagiarism and Narrative Transfer

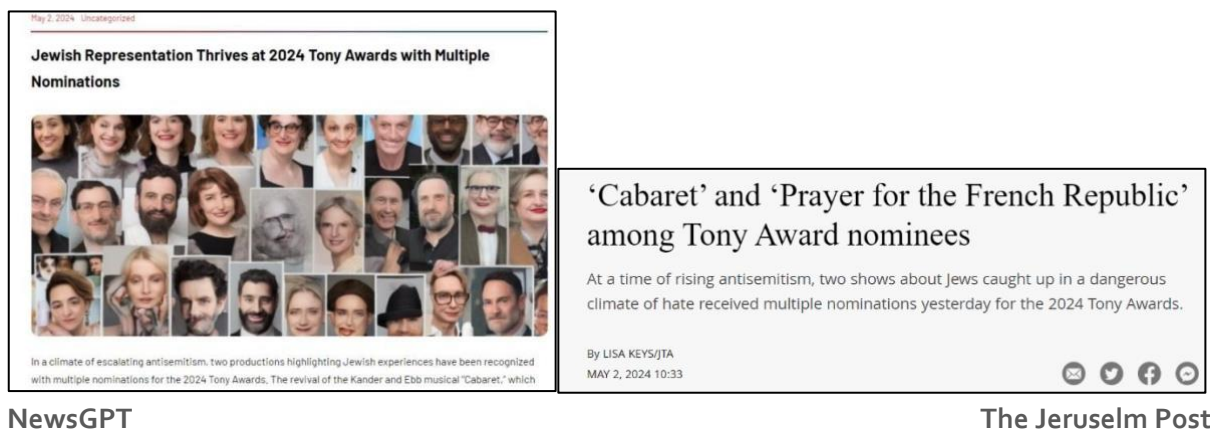
Example 1



An article from Fox News on weather conditions, floating pier construction, and Gaza aid was reproduced by NewsGPT with nearly identical phrasing, repeating key terms such as:

- "Weather changes"
- "Floating pier"
- "Gaza aid"

Example 2



Another article about Jewish representation at the Tony Awards was published by NewsGPT with a title differing in structure but retaining the same narrative:

- Jerusalem Post: "[Headline about antisemitism and Tony nominations]"
- NewsGPT: "[Different syntax, but same point: 'Despite rising antisemitism, Jewish artists lead Tony nominations']"

In both cases, the AI system preserved the tone, keywords, and framing of the original publications. These findings suggest that NewsGPT's model largely inherits the ideological and editorial stance of the source outlet whether implicitly or explicitly.

Conclusion and Key Findings

This research was guided by four core questions, each addressed through a qualitative content analysis approach:

1. Can AI technologies produce unbiased news?
2. How are AI-native news stories created on the NewsGPT platform?
3. Does the platform provide balanced geographic coverage?
4. What value do AI-native news products contribute to the post-truth era?

The findings indicate that the AI-generated news on NewsGPT—termed AI-Native News in this study—is largely built upon existing content from mainstream Northern sources, particularly CNN and Fox News. This heavy reliance on Global North outlets introduces systematic bias by excluding Global South perspectives and narratives from the pool of "trusted" sources.

This skew in source material clearly influenced both:

- The geographic distribution of coverage (with the U.S. overwhelmingly dominant at 68.7%, followed distantly by Germany, Russia, and Ukraine), and
- The selection of topics, with protests, Trump, and U.S. elections comprising the top three themes. These are events centered in the Global North.

Despite the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza at the time of the study, the region received only one article. By contrast, themes like the Holocaust (8.08%) and the Russia–Ukraine war (6.06%) received more sustained attention. The coverage therefore reflects a clear prioritization of Northern suffering over ongoing crises in the Global South.

Evaluating the Generation Process

The content analysis also revealed high rates of plagiarism, as flagged by CopyLeaks:

- 94.2% of the sample exceeded 50% textual similarity with identified sources.
- 22.8% of the articles were near-complete replicas of another outlet's content.

While NewsGPT does not explicitly claim originality in each article, its framing as a fully AI-driven news model implies that it is generating, not merely rephrasing, news content. However, these results demonstrate that the language model does not yet possess the capacity to independently produce journalistic-quality writing that includes source triangulation, analysis, and investigative depth. This casts serious doubt on the model's current ability to replace human journalists—especially in political reporting, which demands nuance, context, and diverse sourcing.

AI-Native News in the Post-Truth Era

A major concern for journalism in the post-truth era is the opacity of sources. NewsGPT does not list the sources of its generated content. This lack of transparency resembles one of the core traits of disinformation on social media: anonymous or unverifiable origin. Although the platform brands its output as "Unhuman Truth," the results here suggest it more closely resembles repurposed content without accountability. In a context already overwhelmed with disinformation, omitting sources undermines public trust and contributes to the erosion of truth rather than restoring it.

Final Remarks

This study set out to explore a new development in AI and journalism: fully AI-generated news. It reviewed a wide range of relevant literature and applied agenda-setting and post-truth theory to assess NewsGPT's editorial structure and ethical claims.

NewsGPT founder Alan Levy likens AI to a "smart child with no information," one that needs to be fed reliable content. Yet, the AI model in this case did not search across diverse or international sources. Instead, it pulled primarily from U.S. media. Nor did it process those sources with journalistic rigor. CopyLeaks confirmed that most articles showed direct textual borrowing, with limited rewriting or original structuring.

Can AI be a journalist?

This study cannot offer a final answer to that question. But it strongly suggests that NewsGPT's current model does not yet qualify. The platform's articles largely mirror the language and narrative of their sources, especially in tone and framing, with no trace of the critical inquiry that marks true journalism.

Even the topics reflect a narrow geographic and thematic field:

- The U.S. (68.7%) dominated regional coverage.
- Northern topics such as elections, Trump, and the Holocaust made up the majority of stories.
- Gaza, despite an active and devastating conflict, received one mention.

Applying Agenda-Setting Theory, we see that NewsGPT is prioritizing the Global North through its editorial choices. Since perceived importance correlates with frequency of exposure, readers of this platform are being directed to care primarily about Northern affairs thereby reinforcing informational silos.

AI's Role in Journalism: Opportunities and Limitations

AI offers significant advantages to journalism:

- Accelerating content creation
- Automating routine tasks
- Verifying multimedia content
- Assisting fact-checking processes

These strengths have been well documented in previous studies. In a post-truth environment, tools that enhance verification and speed can be highly valuable. But this study shows that complete reliance on AI without editorial intervention remains risky. NewsGPT, in its current form, did not generate original journalism. Its average plagiarism rate exceeded 60%, and the published articles did not display any evidence of journalistic practices like multi-source verification or contextual framing. Journalism is not only about what you say but how you arrive at it the process is as important as the result. AI-generated articles without visible sourcing fall short of this standard. The AI model's self-correction feature—reader voting on whether a story is "fake" or "real"—does not resolve this issue. This input is vulnerable to manipulation, especially by coordinated campaigns or other AI agents, and lacks a mechanism for ground-truth validation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since this case study is limited to an early snapshot of the NewsGPT platform, future research should aim to:

- *Investigate Fake News Generation*
Assess whether the model exhibits “hallucination” or fact fabrication, a known issue in generative AI.
- *Expand the Study Duration*
A 10-day sample is a limitation. Longer-term analysis could offer more robust patterns.
- *Analyze AI-Generated Images*
NewsGPT uses AI-generated visuals. How are image prompts crafted? What narratives do they reinforce?
- *Compare with Other AI-Native Models*
When *Channel 1* launches, it would be valuable to conduct a comparative study of its editorial structure, values, and AI capabilities.

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Âdem Kotan*

The Dissemination of Anti-Immigrant Discourse in X (Formerly Twitter) Hashtags: A Social Network and Media Discourse Analysis of the Case of Vezir Mohammad Nourtani, the Miner Killed

Abstract

This study explores how digital media environments facilitate the production and dissemination of information disorders, with a specific focus on anti-immigrant discourse. It centers on the social media reactions following the death of Vezir Mohammad Nourtani, an Afghan migrant worker who was burned to death in an illegal coal mine in Zonguldak, Turkey. The research examines the proliferation of misinformation on X (formerly Twitter) through the analysis of posts shared between April 10–17, 2025, using relevant hashtags such as #Nourtani, #Sessizİstila (#SilentInvasion), and #Zonguldak. The methodology combines social network analysis with media discourse analysis. This dual approach allows for both the mapping of digital diffusion patterns and the identification of prominent themes and narrative strategies in posts containing misinformation—such as “silent invasion,” “organ trafficking,” “public order threat,” and “double standards.” Simultaneously, news articles published by mainstream national media are examined to analyze how traditional media framing interacts with and influences social media narratives. Findings reveal a polarization in X (formerly Twitter) discourse, with two dominant echo chambers: one advocating for justice and human rights, and the other advancing anti-immigrant sentiments, mostly driven by anonymous or ideologically motivated users. Misinformation spreads rapidly through decontextualized, unverified claims that are often politically instrumentalized. Moreover, the headlines and emphases of media reports significantly shape online narratives. The study argues that information disorders should be evaluated not only in terms of content but also through their structural and narrative components. It highlights the crucial role of social media platforms in discourse production and advocates for enhanced media literacy, fact-checking practices, and platform regulation as key components of digital resilience strategies.

Keywords

Information disorder, anti-immigrant sentiment, social network analysis, disinformation, media discourse, X (formerly Twitter), Wazir Mohammad Nourtani

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Introduction

While access to information has accelerated in the age of digital media, an environment of 'information disorder' has emerged in which false or misleading information has become unprecedentedly widespread. Especially social networks have become channels where disinformation and hate speech against refugees and migrants are easily circulated (Uysal, S., 2022, p.118). Such content creates a cycle of hate in society; it deepens polarization by being produced over and over again. Anti-immigrant fake news and rumours increase xenophobia by poisoning the already sensitive issue of immigration discussions (Sunar, 2020, p. 42). In this context, the incident of the burning death of Afghan migrant worker Vezir Mohammad Nourtani in an illegal mine in Zonguldak should also be examined in terms of how it is handled in digital media. This tragedy has concretely revealed both the various forms of information disorder and the rising anti-immigrant discourse on social media.

After Nourtani's murder, different segments of the X platform shared intensely about the incident, and the narrative of the incident was shaped by quite different discourses in the digital environment. On the one hand, anti-immigrant groups framed the incident from their own perspectives, while on the other hand, human rights defenders and journalists tried to make their voices heard with the demand for justice. This process shows how information can be manipulated in digital media and how anti-immigrant discourses have gained power. In the following sections of the report, we will analyze the digital discourses that developed around this incident in depth and reveal both the dimensions of information disorder and anti-immigrant narrative patterns. First, the conceptual framework will be outlined; then the results of social network analysis, discourse analysis, and media comparison of the relevant posts on X (formerly Twitter) between 10-17 April 2025 will be presented. Finally, in the light of the findings, solutions for combating information disorder will be discussed. This multifaceted examination will provide important clues on how similar incidents in digital media can be handled in the future.

1. Theoretical Framework

Information Disorder: Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation

Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) explain information disorder in three main categories: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. The main distinction in this categorization is whether the information is false or not and the intention behind its dissemination. According to the definitions, misinformation refers to 'information that is false but shared without intention'. It is the dissemination of information that does not reflect the truth, without intending to cause harm, by mistake or unconsciously. Disinformation, on the other hand, is defined as 'the deliberate production and dissemination of false information, usually information distortion with the intent to harm a person, group or country'. In disinformation, information is deliberately falsified or taken out of context and presented with malicious intent. The third category, malinformation, is defined as 'information that is based on fact but is disclosed or leaked with the intent to cause harm'. For example, disclosing a private information or image and harming the target person is considered malinformation. In this context, the difference between misinformation and disinformation is whether misleading information is spread unintentionally or intentionally. Disinformation and malinformation are differentiated by the fact that the content of malinformation is basically true, although both have the intent to cause intentional harm.

It is important to make these distinctions rather than popular but vague concepts such as “fake news” in the context of information disorder, as each misinformation has a different origin and impact. In the social media debates under scrutiny, elements falling into these three categories can be observed. For example, false claims circulating about the incident may be in the dimension of misinformation (incomplete/false information conveyed unintentionally by the sharer), while deliberately distorted discourses may constitute an example of disinformation. Moreover, in the emotional atmosphere triggered by the incident, exaggeration and use of certain real information with the aim of causing harm (e.g., fueling hatred based on the ethnic identity of the defendants) may create a malinformation effect. Therefore, when assessing digital discourses around the Nourtani case, it will be necessary to consider the types of information disorder they contain.

Anti-immigrant Discourses: Common Narrative Patterns

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in negative discourses against immigrants in Turkey and around the world. These anti-immigrant narratives spread on social media have certain stereotypical themes. The main common themes can be summarized as follows: (Bauman, 2017, p. 42).

“Silent Invasion” (Demographic Threat): According to this conspiracy narrative frequently voiced by anti-immigrant groups, Turkey is facing a silent invasion. Especially the mass influx of Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers into the country is framed as a ‘strategic migration engineering’ project. It is claimed that this ‘project’ aims to disrupt the demographic structure of Turkish society. The discourse of silent invasion is a lie imported from far-right circles in Europe and has found its place in racist discourses in Turkey. In this narrative, immigrants are presented as an enemy secretly taking over the country; the invaded party is the native population. For example, political figures such as the Zafer Party adopted this narrative and tried to create social fear by claiming that ‘the silent invasion is financed by the money of the Turkish nation’ and that it imposes a ‘heavy economic burden’ on the country (Independent Turkish, 2025).

Threat to Public Order and Security: In this theme, migrants are identified with crime and public order problems. It is claimed that asylum-seekers disrupt public order, increase crime rates, and are involved in terrorism and harassment cases. Especially in social media, singular incidents are taken out of their context and attributed to all migrants, and the discourse of ‘the country has become unsafe’ is processed. In connection with the silent invasion narrative, migrants are coded as ‘the enemy within’. Analyses show that war discourses such as ‘invasion’ and ‘repelling the enemy’ in online anti-immigrant content are part of this security threat narrative. For example, after the Nourtani incident, a user X stated that “Even our underground mines have become unsafe because of illegal migrants” and portrayed migrants as a source of crime. In this way, even a tragic event can be framed as a danger of migrant presence (Teyit.org, 2021).

Economic Burden and Unfair Competition: Another common discourse is the claim that migrants overburden the national economy (Uysal, 2022, p. 19). According to this narrative, asylum seekers consume the resources of the state, get an unfair share from social aids and cause unfair competition in the labour market. Especially in the environment of high inflation and unemployment, the presence of immigrants is associated with the livelihood problems of the people, and reactions such

as 'they work with cheap labour while our young people are unemployed' are observed. There have also been politicians who have targeted immigrants as responsible for the economic crisis in the country. For example, in the discourse of the Zafer Party, it is claimed that asylum seekers have burdened the Turkish economy 'to the extent that it has experienced one of the heaviest crises in its history.' After the Nourtani incident, some posts emphasized economic injustice in the form of 'Turkish workers cannot find a job because foreigners are employed cheaply in illegal quarries' (soL News, 2025).

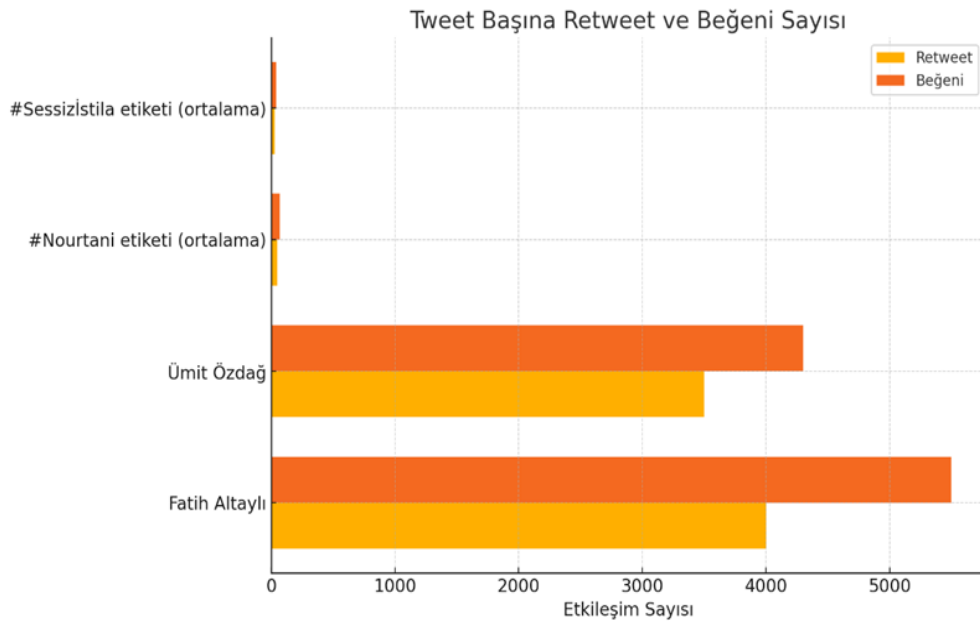
Injustice and Institutional Double Standards: This theme includes discourses that claim that law and justice mechanisms treat migrants differently. It can be seen as twofold: Anti-immigrants argue that the state 'privileges migrants while putting its own citizens second'. For example, unsubstantiated allegations often circulated on social media claim that asylum seekers are paid salaries and that they enter university without exams. On the other hand, human rights defenders emphasize that migrants are disadvantaged in justice mechanisms. The low sentence in the Nourtani case has led to criticism of an 'institutional double standard' (Sunar, 2020, p. 31).

There were reactions such as "If a Turkish citizen had been killed, this sentence would not have been so low" or 'The case is being covered up because the migrant died'. Indeed, the fact that the defendants were sentenced to only 5 years and 8 months at the end of the trial led to comments on social media that "justice was not served". This double standard discourse, combined with distrust of public authority over the sense of justice, creates a powerful counter-narrative (Bianet, 2025).

The above patterns are common themes of anti-immigrant digital discourse in Turkey. These narratives, often supported by disinformation, influence public opinion with baseless claims such as the 'silent invasion lie'. For example, exaggerating the number of migrants in Turkey, presenting crime news with an emphasis on ethnic identity, or conspiracy theories (e.g., the claim that 'millions of refugees were brought in with a secret agreement') serve to spread these themes. The X discourses that we will analyze in this report also contain concrete manifestations of these patterns.

2. Method

In this study, a multifaceted analysis was conducted by collecting posts related to the Nourtani incident on the X (formerly Twitter) platform between 10-17 April 2025. During the data collection phase, three main hashtags were used that were found to be directly related to the incident: #Nourtani, #SilentInvasion and #Zonguldak. The tweets collected under these tags were retrieved from the X (formerly Twitter) API through a Python-based script. Over the course of a week, approximately 8,000 tweets, including retweets and replies, and more than 5,000 users who shared these tweets were included in the dataset.



Social Network Analysis (SNA): Social network analysis method was applied to examine the interaction network between users in the collected data. In particular, a network graph was created over the retweet relationships and the interaction clusters and the connections between them were mapped. For this purpose, cluster analysis was performed using the modularity algorithm in Gephi software. Thus, it was revealed which user groups retweeted each other more and which groups were segregated within the network. The results, the details of which will be presented in the results section, indicated the existence of two main clusters: A cluster dominated by anti-immigrant discourses and a cluster dominated by human rights-oriented discourses.

Discourse Analysis: Using a qualitative analysis approach, tweet contents were coded thematically. Randomly selected tweets with high interaction were analyzed textually to identify the language used, prominent themes and narrative patterns. During the coding process, categories such as 'anti-immigrant', 'rights-based', "misinformation", 'hate speech' were defined and tweets were classified according to these categories. In particular, the prevalence of thematic content such as 'silent invasion', 'threat to public order', 'demand for justice' was analyzed. In addition, pairs of tweets with opposing views (e.g., one claim and one response refuting this claim) were grouped side by side, and discursive differences were analyzed.

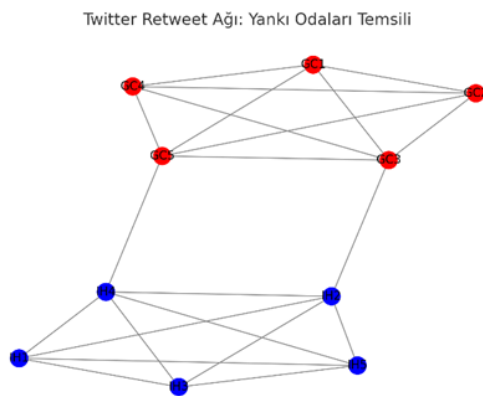
Cross Media Comparison: A cross-media analysis was conducted to see how the discourse on social media interacts with traditional media news. For this purpose, national and local news published in the same time period about the Nourtani incident were scanned. In particular, the frame in which the event was presented in newspapers/news websites (for example, whether it was called 'work accident' or 'murder'), the differences of the headline and news language from the discourse on social media were determined. Then, it was analyzed how users on X share and interpret these news items. In this way, determinations were also made about the reframing of news headlines on social media. An example of this is when a mainstream news website's news article titled "'no evidence' verdict in the case of Afghan worker's death" (Hürriyet, 2025) is angrily shared by X users as "Afghan worker was

murdered but the court did not sentence him saying there was no evidence". Such examples reveal how the discourse in traditional media is transformed in the social media environment.

Throughout the analysis, quantitative and qualitative findings were evaluated together. While quantitative data such as tweet frequencies and engagement metrics are summarized in tables, important tweet examples and quotes are used to support the qualitative findings. In the following section, the findings will be presented under subheadings.

3. Results and Discussion

Social Network Map: Clusters and Echo Chambers



Above is a social network graph showing the retweet network between accounts using the hashtags #Nourtani, #SilentInvasion and #Zonguldak during the period 10-17 April. Two main clusters stand out in the graph: The nodes in red represent accounts that engage in largely anti-immigrant discourse, while the nodes in blue represent accounts that engage in human rights-oriented discourse. There are only a few weak connections (grey lines) between the two clusters. This suggests that both groups form an echo chamber with intense interaction within themselves but engage in limited dialogue with each other.

The anti-immigrant cluster consists mostly of accounts that use the hashtag #SilentInvasion or support this discourse. Within this cluster, certain opinion leaders (e.g., some journalists and politicians known for their anti-immigrant views) were found to have a central position. In the graph, the nodes located in the centre of the red cluster are accounts that receive high retweets and play a kind of amplifier role.

As a matter of fact, the data analysis revealed that a significant portion of the most retweeted posts belonged to Zafer Party officials or supporters. In this cluster, the content largely circulates within the group and there is almost no space for opposing views. The gap between the red and blue clusters in the network map clearly reveals this segregation.

The human rights-oriented cluster includes accounts that approach the issue from a different perspective. This cluster includes refugee rights advocates, left/socialist activists, some journalists,

and supporters of the Nourtani family. The blue cluster also has its own prominent accounts—for example, a tweet by a prominent human rights lawyer was repeatedly shared within this group. The discourse of this cluster is centred around the demand for justice and content that emphasizes conscientious values. The retweet network reveals that users in the blue cluster also mostly retweet each other and do not interact much with anti-immigrant users. Only a few accounts (the few lines connecting the red and blue clusters in the graph are indicative of this) functioned as bridges between the two groups. These bridge accounts are usually journalists or a few neutral accounts followed by both sides. In general, however, it is possible to say that the social media debate ran in parallel in two separate echo chambers.

In conclusion, the social network analysis clearly reflects a polarization created by platform algorithms and user preference. Anti-immigrant and pro-immigrant communities are positioned as separate camps on X, with each group circulating posts that reinforce its own discourse. This finding is critical in terms of showing that different views can exist in isolation from each other in the digital public sphere and that a real dialogue ground has not been formed.

Tweet Content Analysis: Counter Discourse Examples

These two clusters, which are separated on the social network map, also have pronounced discourse differences in terms of content. Selected examples of tweets from the two opposing groups are presented and analyzed below:

Sample Tweet (Anti-Migrant Discourse): "An Afghan who was illegally employed in Zonguldak was burned by his bosses after a work accident. The Silent Invasion in our country is everywhere! Because of illegal immigrants, illegal business is booming; there is no public order left." - In this tweet, the incident is linked to the narrative of silent invasion. Rather than addressing Nourtani as an individual, the author emphasizes the identity dimension with the emphasis on 'illegal Afghan'. He also addresses the presence of immigrants as the cause of the incident. The expression 'illegal activities are on the rise' reflects the perception that identifies migrants with crime. This discourse is a typical anti-immigrant reaction in which the theme of security threat and partly the argument of economic injustice are used together. Moreover, the statement 'there is no public order in our country' reinforces the claim that asylum-seekers create a chaotic environment.

Example Tweet (Human Rights-Oriented Discourse): *"If you shoot a deer, you get 4 years in prison; they burned a man to death and got 5 years and 8 months! Is this justice? Is Vezir Mohammad Nourtani's life so worthless? We will not remain silent in the face of this brutality. #Nourtani #Justice"* – This tweet represents a completely opposite perspective. By highlighting the leniency of the court's ruling, the author appeals to the sense of justice, emphasizing Nourtani's humanity and the value of his life instead of using anti-immigrant language. By providing an example from criminal law (comparing the penalty for killing a deer with that for killing a human), the author reinforces the theme of injustice. The statement *"We will not remain silent in the face of this brutality"* conveys both an emotional reaction and a call for collective action. From the hashtags used (#Nourtani #Justice), such posts foreground the search for justice in relation to the specific incident. This tweet is an example of the institutional double standard narrative, criticizing the justice system for failing to sufficiently value the life of a refugee worker.

The examples above represent the two extremes of the tweets examined. Among the hundreds of tweets analyzed, there are also shades of gray; however, the overall trend tends to concentrate around these two frames. Common keywords in anti-immigrant tweets include “silent invasion,” “illegal immigrant,” “crime/terror,” and “government’s fault,” whereas human rights-oriented tweets prominently feature concepts such as “justice,” “brutality,” “humanity,” and “refugee rights.” In particular, the slogan “*We will not remain silent in the face of this brutality*” became a small-scale trend on social media following the April 12 hearing. Both sides resorted to symbolizing the incident to reinforce their own narratives: for anti-immigrant voices, the Nourtani case became a symbol of “the state of decline the country has fallen into,” while for supporters, it became a symbol of “justice not being served.”

Quantitative Data: Engagement Rates and Hashtag Usage

To quantitatively understand the intensity and characteristics of the digital debate surrounding the Nourtani case, tweet frequencies, engagement metrics, and hashtag usage frequencies were analyzed. The general statistics of the tweets collected between April 10–17, 2025, can be summarized as follows:

Total number of tweets (original tweets + retweets): 8,324

Number of unique users: 5,210

Average number of likes per tweet: 12.4

Average number of retweets per tweet: 6.8

Looking at the posts with the highest engagement, a tweet by well-known journalist Fatih Altaylı criticizing the sentences by saying “*there is no actual jail time*” and a tweet by the leader of the Zafer Party using the incident to criticize the government were at the forefront. Altaylı’s tweet received more than 4,000 retweets, while the post from the Zafer Party side received around 3,500 retweets. These two highly engaged tweets, with opposing content, indicate that the debate reached a broad audience. In addition, tweets directly related to the incident and demanding justice under the hashtag #Nourtani received an average of around 50 retweets, while tweets under the hashtag #Sessizİstila (“Silent Invasion”), which also included the incident, averaged around 30 retweets. It can be said that although anti-immigrant tweets were slightly fewer in number, the engagement density was at a similar level due to the more homogeneous nature of their target audience.

The table below shows the most frequently used hashtags during the analyzed time period and the number of tweets in which they appeared:

Table 1. Most Frequently Used Hashtags and Corresponding Tweet Counts between April 10–17, 2025.

Hashtag	Number of Tweets
#Nourtani	5.200
#Sessizİstila	4.700

Hashtag	Number of Tweets
#Zonguldak	3.900
#VezirMohammadNourtaniİçinAdalet	1.600
#Adalet	1.200

As seen in Table 1, the hashtag #Nourtani is the most frequently used, appearing in 5,200 tweets. This hashtag was used both in neutral posts providing information about the incident and in content demanding justice. The hashtag #Sessizİstila ranks second with 4,700 tweets, indicating the anti-immigrant circles' effort to link the incident to the broader anti-immigrant discourse. Indeed, beyond this specific incident, #Sessizİstila has become a keyword of anti-foreigner discourse in Turkey. The fact that the hashtag #Zonguldak appears in 3,900 tweets points to the emphasis on the local context of the incident in the national discussion—especially in frames like “The people of Zonguldak are outraged.” The activist-driven hashtag #VezirMohammadNourtaniİçinAdalet appeared in around 1,600 tweets; while its use is relatively limited due to being a longer and more specific tag, it represents a significant conceptualization effort (bringing the demand for justice for Nourtani directly into the hashtag). Lastly, the more general #Adalet hashtag appeared in roughly 1,200 tweets, underscoring the framing of the incident as a matter of justice.

Considering these data, it can be said that anti-immigrant discourse spread through more general (such as #SilentInvasion) and more popular hashtags, whereas human rights–focused discourse expressed itself through event-specific (such as #Nourtani) and more particular hashtags (such as #JusticeFor...). This points to a strategic difference: while anti-immigrant actors incorporated the incident into their broader grand narratives (silent invasion, irregular migration), supporters sought to publicize it as a unique struggle for justice in its own right.

Narrative Themes and Common Discourses

It was examined whether the anti-immigrant narrative patterns discussed in the theoretical section above found their practical counterparts in the debates surrounding the Nourtani incident. Content analysis revealed that the same themes were repeated in this case as well, albeit in different forms.

Silent Invasion/Demographic Threat: A significant portion of anti-immigrant tweets presented the incident as evidence of a larger invasion scenario. With expressions such as *“Afghans have filled every mountain and plain, what difference would it make if we caught them”*, it was claimed that uncontrolled migration was causing such tragedies in every corner of the country. Some users even downplayed the culpability of the employers involved, instead emphasizing that the real issue was *“what so many Afghans are doing here in the first place.”* For instance, one tweet stated, *“Because of irregular migration, the country’s mountains and fields are full of illegal workers, and then disasters like this happen,”* suggesting that, had there been no migrants, this incident would not have occurred at all. This discourse is a manifestation of the invasion narrative, which frames the very presence of migrants as a threat and an undesirable element.

Threat to Public Order/Security: Many users approached the incident from the perspective of crime and public order. Comments such as *"Who knows what else is happening in these illegal mines, the country is slipping away"* carried the implication that irregular migrants were increasing unlawful activities. Some extreme remarks even tried to frame Nourtani's death as possibly *"a reckoning within the criminal underworld."* Despite the lack of any evidence, disinformative posts circulated that presented the case as an internal execution within a migrant smuggling network. This is an example of an effort to criminalize migrants at the cost of distorting reality. On the other hand, the human rights-focused side addressed the theme of security from a different angle: for them, the real security issue is the precarious and unregistered employment of workers. The notion of *"public order"* was questioned in terms of the state's failure to ensure worker safety. For instance, the statement *"The real issue in our country is the absence of occupational safety and inspections; migrant workers are the most vulnerable group"* reframed the security theme through the perspective of labor rights.

Economic Burden/Injustice: Alongside the "silent invasion" narrative, the discourse portraying migrants as an economic burden was also identified. Some anti-immigrant tweets, rather than speaking about Nourtani specifically, included populist remarks such as *"People are starving, and these guys work for free and steal our bread."* In this discourse, even an issue like illegal mining was reduced to the presence of migrants, with statements like *"Without cheap Syrian and Afghan labor, these illegal mines could not survive."* Yet although the problem of illegal mining is a structural one, here migrants were scapegoated. By contrast, the human rights-focused group centered on the economic victimization of Nourtani's family. The narrative of *"a father of three, a worker who gave his life for bread"* was repeated in many messages of solidarity. Moreover, Nourtani's life story—which found little place in mainstream media—was recounted on social media by activists: he was portrayed as a laborer who fled poverty in Afghanistan, came to Turkey, and worked in the harshest unregistered jobs. In this way, the attempt was to construct not the image of a migrant as an economic burden, but rather of a *"migrant worker whose labor is exploited."* Indeed, on International Labour Day some demonstrators carried banners with Nourtani's photo and the slogan *"We have no identity, but we have labor."* This banner conveyed a striking message: that migrant workers, though undocumented (without identity), exist through their labor and that their invisibility is powerfully laid bare.

Injustice/Institutional Double Standards: With the announcement of the trial's outcome, discourse around this theme surged. Both anti-immigrant and pro-immigrant voices criticized the justice system—albeit for different reasons. The anti-immigrant side, while finding the court's ruling insufficient, combined it with a broader critique of the system: *"There is no justice in Turkey, criminals walk free again, after all the one who died was a foreigner."* Here, xenophobia and institutional distrust were intertwined.

Human rights advocates, on the other hand, directly voiced the double standard in the case: the question *"If the victim had been Turkish, would the same ruling have been issued?"* was raised repeatedly. When lawyer Kerim Bahadır Şeker's words—*"You get four years for shooting a deer, five years for burning a man"*—were reported in the press, they went viral on social media, turning into a slogan for justice. Organizations such as the Migrant Solidarity Network staged press statements in front of the courthouse and livestreamed them on social media, declaring that they would continue

to follow the case. The statement *"These cases get covered up the more silence there is around them"* revealed that activists did not trust institutions but sought to influence the process through public pressure. Indeed, because of this pressure, the case was taken to appeal, and complaints were filed with the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK). All these developments were shared on social media in real time, and thanks to X, they reached large audiences, despite receiving limited coverage in mainstream media.

The narrative themes summarized above are the categorical findings of the digital discourse analysis. The anti-immigrant camp largely discussed the incident through demographic and security-oriented themes, whereas the human rights camp emphasized themes of justice and labor. Both sides framed the incident within a context that went beyond the event itself, aligning it with their own worldview. Sociologically, this demonstrates how the same phenomenon can be transformed into entirely different stories within different universes of meaning.

Media and Social Media Interaction: Framing Differences

While the Nourtani incident was being intensely debated on social media, it also became news in traditional media. However, clear differences were identified between the framing of the news reports and the reframing on social media. Mainstream news sites and agencies, first and foremost, focused on the judicial dimension of the case. For example, in reports sourced from DHA, emphasis was placed on the court's statement that "no conclusive and convincing evidence could be found," while major news portals such as NTV quoted from the court's reasoned judgment and presented the case through the dilemma of *"work accident or murder?"* Headlines used phrases such as *"reasoned judgment: no evidence"*, thereby reflecting the court's perspective on the legitimacy of a decision that had provoked major public backlash. Likewise, some newspapers presented the incident as a workplace safety story under titles like *"scandal in an illegal mine,"* relegating the migration dimension to the background.

On social media, however, users shared these news reports with their own commentary, often turning the language of the articles upside down. For example, in response to NTV's report emphasizing *"no evidence,"* many users reacted with comments such as *"No evidence, really? They poured gasoline and burned him—what more evidence do you need?"* Such posts received thousands of interactions, and instead of the original headline, it was these comments circulating on social media that came to the fore. Social media users thus reframed and re-presented the discourse of traditional media. In this reframing, an emotional and partisan language replaced the more detached and neutral tone of mainstream outlets. Expressions like *"brutality," "was murdered,"* and *"we want justice"* were shared alongside the news links. In this way, even a user who had not seen the original report would read it through social media commentary as *"a worker brutally burned to death and a scandalous sentence."*

Another noteworthy point is the stance taken by certain media outlets in this case. In pro-government media, the incident generally received limited coverage and was brushed aside with relatively neutral expressions such as *"Illegal mine disaster in Zonguldak."* Opposition media, by contrast (for example, *BirGün, Cumhuriyet*), addressed the issue more from the perspective of labor rights and government criticism. This divergence was also reflected on social media: the anti-

immigrant group claimed that pro-government media were covering up the incident, while the human rights group shared reports from opposition outlets, saying "*look, there are those who are writing the truth.*" In this sense, X also functioned as a kind of platform for media criticism. Followers debated how and in what way the news was presented in different outlets. In particular, a report on Halk TV claiming that an MHP district chairman was a partner in this illegal mine was widely shared on social media, accompanied by the narrative "*the dirty business of the ruling coalition partner is being covered up.*" Although this allegation received little space in the mainstream, it became a trending topic on social media. In sum, news framings were constantly reinterpreted and transformed by social media. Users who took a critical stance toward the language of traditional media either filled in the gaps left by the coverage or exaggerated it according to their own perspective. It should also be noted that, in this process of interaction, a fertile ground for information disorder was created.

Some users shared additional details that were not present in the news, as if they were facts (for example, unverified claims such as "*the presiding judge turned out to be an MHP member*"). In this way, social media both facilitated access to news and made it susceptible to speculation. Nonetheless, on the positive side, a worker's murder—something that might have been quickly forgotten in the mainstream agenda—continued to be discussed for days on X, keeping the demand for justice alive. In this regard, social media could be instrumentalized as a voice for a disadvantaged group (migrant workers). At the same time, however, it also served as a platform for hate speech.

In the following section, the implications of these findings in a broader context and their effects on the digital media ecosystem will be discussed.

4. Discussion

The analysis of digital discourse on X following the Nourtani incident reveals the structural and discursive dimensions of information disorder. Considering the findings, the following points for discussion emerge:

Isolated Discourse Universes: The two distinct clusters revealed in the social network analysis demonstrate the strength of echo chambers on digital platforms. Anti-immigrant and pro-support groups reinforced their narratives almost entirely in isolation from one another. This is also a result of X's algorithmic structure. As users like and share content that interests them and aligns with their views, the platform shows them similar content more frequently. Consequently, one side hears only the *silent invasion* discourse, while the other constantly encounters the *demand for justice* narrative. The tendency of platform algorithms to promote polarizing content in order to increase engagement deprives public debate of a shared common ground. The result is that everyone believes in their own version of reality and becomes completely deaf to the other side's arguments. In this study, it was observed that both groups completely rejected the opposing group's claims and focused on different aspects of the incident. This is a structural problem and is not limited to the Nourtani incident. It once again confirms that living within "idea bubbles" on social media in general makes societal consensus more difficult to achieve.

Emotional and Personalized Discourse: It was observed that, compared to traditional media, the incident was addressed on social media with a much more emotional language. Discourses revolving

around feelings of anger and fear triggered fear (invasion, insecurity), while human rights narratives activated anger (anger in the face of injustice). As Claire Wardle emphasizes regarding information disorder, emotions play a critical role in the spread of online content. Similarly, in this case, the most widely shared posts were those that elicited the strongest emotional responses. For example, some tweets containing hate speech, even though expressed in radical terms, went viral within their own groups, feeding followers' feelings of fear and anger. This also facilitated the spread of false or unverified information. When people share news in anger, they tend not to take the time to question its accuracy. The discursive dimension of information disorder is often sustained by being intertwined with emotional rhetoric. Social media users evaluate content that confirms their beliefs through an emotional filter, which leads to the unfiltered spread of misinformation.

The Digital Populism of Anti-Immigrant Discourse: Examining anti-immigrant content also reveals how populist rhetoric takes shape in digital spaces. Discourses such as "*The people are victims, elites and foreigners are collaborating*" were frequently repeated. This represents a form of populism that combines both xenophobia and anger at the system. On social media, this discourse was propagated through short and striking slogans (for example, "*Nation first!*", "*No aid for Syrians while Turks are hungry*", etc.). Such slogans are well suited to fast-consumed digital content formats. As a result, they quickly reach large audiences, whereas human rights messages—which often require longer explanations or contextualization—may not spread at the same speed. This asymmetry affects the structure of digital debate. Simple, accusatory narratives are more advantaged online than complex narratives that require empathy. This phenomenon is also well known in disinformation studies: "*Falsehoods spread faster than truth.*" Especially on issues like migration, which already generate societal concern, simple accusatory rhetoric can become a tool of online populism. The Nourtani case confirms this in a specific instance.

Information Verification and Journalistic Practice: During the debates, a lack of verification mechanisms was felt for some of the claims that emerged. For example, various rumors circulated on social media regarding organ trafficking allegations or the political connections of the defendants. When mainstream media did not go into detail beyond official information, this gap was filled by social media speculation. If fact-checking platforms had been active during this period, some misinformation might have been quickly debunked. However, as observed, no comprehensive fact-checking content specific to this case appeared within that week. This points to a gap in the information ecosystem. As discussions heated up on social media, accessing accurate information became dependent on individuals' own efforts. Some users made claims without citing sources, and users with opposing views attempted to debunk these claims on behalf of the entire group. In this vicious cycle, many people formed opinions without full knowledge of the facts. For instance, the expression that Nourtani was "*burned alive*" was widely used, although the forensic report states that the exact moment of death could not be determined. This technical detail was omitted in digital discourse because it did not fit the emotional narrative. The discussion unfolded more on ethical and political arguments than on scientific evidence. This, in turn, reflects a problem of rationality deficiency in the digital public sphere.

Risk of Deepening Social Polarization: The binary opposing discourse formed around the migration issue on social media also reflects existing cracks within society. In the Nourtani case, the perpetrator

was Turkish, and the victim was a migrant, making it a unique example for anti-immigrant discourse; yet the digital discourse framed the issue directly as a Turkish vs. migrant equation. Preexisting societal polarization can be further sharpened by such incidents. Both sides see themselves in a position of moral superiority: anti-immigrant voices believe they are speaking in the name of "*patriotism*," while human rights supporters consider themselves defending "*conscience and justice*." The inability to find common ground even in such a fundamental human tragedy shows that divisions in digital communication can pose a threat to social cohesion. Particularly, the ease with which disinformation can take root in politically sensitive topics like migration may signal the emergence of larger social crises in the future. This part of the discussion section highlights the risks indicated by the findings.

The above assessments draw general inferences from a specific case. Information disorder is not merely a technical problem; it has also become a tool in the struggle for discursive hegemony. Anti-immigrant groups actively use digital platforms to make their perspective the dominant narrative. Concepts such as *Silent Invasion* have become almost part of digital popular culture. In response, human rights advocates attempt to resist on the same platforms with a discourse of justice. This dynamic is a reality of today's digital society.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

In conclusion, the brutal killing of Afghan migrant worker Vezir Mohammad Nourtani in Zonguldak has been examined as a small laboratory case of information disorder and polarized discourse in digital media. This analysis demonstrates how a single incident can be transformed into two completely different narratives on social media platforms, and how misinformation and biases play a role in this process. It was observed that anti-immigrant discourses were fueled by fear, hatred, and disinformation, whereas human rights discourses were shaped by anger, solidarity, and the pursuit of truth. In both cases, there were moments when emotions and perceptions took precedence over facts. The lesson to be drawn from this study is that the dangers and opportunities of digital media should not be ignored. On the one hand, social media provides a fertile ground for the rapid spread of hate speech and misinformation. On the other hand, issues that mainstream media ignores or removes from the agenda can be kept visible through social media. The Nourtani case gained nationwide attention thanks to X, and at least the judicial process was compelled to proceed under public scrutiny. However, the methods and language used in doing so fall short of an ideal debate environment. Therefore, combating information disorder and creating a healthier digital public sphere are of paramount importance. In this context, based on the findings of our study, some policy recommendations are presented below.

Media Literacy Mobilization: Increasing digital media literacy across society is one of the most effective long-term solutions. People should be able to distinguish whether the content they read is emotionally manipulative or reliable news. To this end, media literacy courses should be strengthened at the school curriculum level. For adults, public service announcements, workshops, and online courses should be organized to explain how disinformation operates. The public should be particularly informed about common misconceptions regarding migrants (e.g., the false claim that migrants are given salaries). Media literacy not only prevents individuals from being misled by false

information but also reduces the impact of hate speech. An educated audience will be more resilient to emotional provocations.

Transparency and Regulation on Social Platforms: The algorithms and content moderation policies of X and similar platforms should be more transparent. Mechanisms such as "*trending topics*" or "*top posts*" should be subject to independent audits to clarify how they operate. Particularly during election periods or sensitive social events, platforms need to take proactive measures against disinformation and hate speech. Policymakers should work with social media companies to develop regulatory frameworks. For example, the European Union's Digital Services Act can serve as a model; Turkey could similarly require platforms to provide transparent reporting and quickly address harmful content. Of course, freedom of expression must be balanced in this process. The goal should not be to suppress critical opinions, but to filter false news and hate speech. Innovations such as X's *community notes* feature for fact-checking should be encouraged and further developed.

Strengthening Verification Mechanisms: Fact-checking organizations already operating in the country, such as teyit.org and Doğruluk Payı, should be supported and expanded. If such institutions had been able to act quickly in high-profile cases like the Nourtani incident to debunk circulating false claims, the impact of disinformation could have been limited. Therefore, fact-checking organizations should receive both financial and reputational support. Media organizations can also establish their own verification units and consult them before reporting on questionable issues. In addition, social media platforms should expand practices such as adding warning labels to posts when verified false information is detected. For example, a warning such as "*The accuracy of this claim is disputed*" encourages users to question the content they see. Platforms can also provide special information boxes for frequently circulated falsehoods (for instance, a conspiracy like "*silent invasion*"), offering users background information.

Promoting Positive and Inclusive Narratives: Not only defensive measures but also proactive discourse strategies are important. Public institutions and civil society should work together to improve societal perceptions of migrants. For example, successful integration stories and the contributions of migrants to society should be made more visible in digital media. The antidote to negative frames such as "*silent invasion*" is to strengthen the narrative of "*living together and solidarity*." Campaigns, hashtags, and creative digital content can offer the public an alternative perspective. Indeed, in the Nourtani case, some users tried to foster empathy with slogans like "*We are all Vezir*." Such approaches should be multiplied and supported by institutional actors as well. For instance, municipalities or government agencies can share events demonstrating solidarity between migrants and local communities on social media, creating an alternative agenda against hate speech.

Legal Sanctions and Monitoring: When hate speech and disinformation exceed a certain threshold, legal procedures should be implemented. Under the current legal framework, racist statements fall under the crime of inciting hatred and hostility and are subject to criminal sanctions. However, in practice, hate speech on social media often goes unpunished. This balance must be carefully maintained: while protecting freedom of expression, legal warning mechanisms should be activated for content that calls for violence or has been clearly identified as false and provocative. Law enforcement and judicial authorities can monitor organized disinformation campaigns (bot accounts,

coordinated hashtag operations, etc.) and intervene as necessary. To achieve this, the technical capacity of digital monitoring teams should be enhanced. For example, if a hashtag is suddenly promoted by thousands of bot accounts, authorities could contact the platform to have that hashtag removed from trending lists.

In conclusion, combating information disorder and anti-migrant discourse in digital media requires a multidimensional effort. The debates surrounding the tragic death of Nourtani have shown us that accurate information and human values can only find space in the public sphere if actively defended. Otherwise, gaps are filled with false information and hate speech. Society must take measures today to ensure more sensible and informed responses in the event of similar incidents in the future. Raising media-literate individuals who are open to diverse opinions and capable of critical thinking; creating transparent and accountable digital platforms; and demonstrating zero tolerance for hate speech are the cornerstones of this struggle. In this way, the digital communication environment can be made healthier, contributing to a future in which social peace and reliable information prevail. The pursuit of justice for Nourtani is, at the same time, a pursuit of digital justice: it is a struggle for a fair, trustworthy, and inclusive information ecosystem. This struggle is the responsibility of all of us.

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Öykü Mutlu Çimitay*

Instagram Influencers Economy as a Source of Disinformation: A Critical Approach to the Wellness Consumption Culture

Abstract

The globalization of the capitalist economic system has led to the digitization of the information age and the emergence of networked societies. Today, people use digital media platforms as a source of information. Among these platforms, Instagram, which emphasizes lifestyle content in a visual format, has become a leading source of information in Turkey. This platform also offers the opportunity for influencer economics from marketing activities. This study aimed to examine the risk of disinformation in wellness-related content affected by the influencer economy on Instagram by synthesizing a partial literature analysis and a pilot netnography conducted as a trial for a doctoral thesis. Then, its results were evaluated under the influence of E. Goffman's "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" and C. Fuchs's "Participation Culture" theories. Most of the disinformation risks identified in the review of ten research studies conducted on influencers producing wellness content on Instagram were also observed in the netnography study. In November-December 2024, according to content analysis of a dataset consisting of 272 visuals obtained by observing the Instagram accounts of three highly engaged influencers producing Turkish wellness lifestyle content, it is revealed that all three influencers have similar purposes outlined by motivating and inspiring their followers on their healthy living journeys while generating economic gains through various advertising-heavy methods. Consequently, this study identified disinformation risks that could lead to misperceptions of healthy eating habits and cause inadequate or unbalanced nutrition patterns, as influencers create content on wellness topics with the vision of growing their economies by generating engagement. They do this by normalizing thin and muscular bodies, creating body dissatisfaction, and promoting consumption-oriented posts that highlight certain food groups and eating patterns. Finally, this study identifies opportunities for ensuring ethical standards regarding the expertise of content creators and the shared content. It also proposes a policy recommendation that platform-owning companies and advertisers should be held accountable for structuring influencer economies.

Keywords

Instagram, influencer marketing, self-presentation, participation culture, disinformation, wellness, netnography

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Introduction

The globalization of the capitalist economic system has led to the digitization of the information age and the formation of networked societies, thereby transforming digitized information into an economy (Castells, 2009). This transformation, occurring in a context where information intensity has increased and become a source of power, has also led to ignorance being treated as a source of disinformation (Mohammed, 2012). On the other hand, digital media platforms have become a leading source of information, particularly on products, services, and health-related topics (*Sources of Information about Products in Turkey 2024*| Statista, n.d.). This situation contributes to the development of the influencer economy as marketing activities. (Kalinová & Neubergová, 2021). This study¹, which combines a review of the literature examining influencers who share content on wellness lifestyle topics on Instagram with a pilot netnography approach, examines how the influencer economy contributes to the risk of disinformation. It also explores the relationship between the influencer economy and disinformation risk through the lens of C. Fuchs's "Culture of Participation" (Fuchs, 2014) and E. Goffman's "Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) theories.

Digital Media in the "Post-Truth" Era

In an era of information overload created by the constant flow of "social" media on our devices, with the transition of digital communication technology to Web 2.0, we now have access to information that anyone can produce at any moment, whether we need it or not. This excessive production of information, *infoduction*², leads to an unorganized information system. Today, we no longer need to go to libraries and search through books to learn about history, geography, space, cooking, music, etc. Instead, we can obtain the information we need from the internet, which has become a place of information disorder (Erdoğan et al., 2022). The information age has turned into the "post-truth" era, where we can accept false information as accurate (O'Callaghan, 2019). As technology improves, the methods of information production, transmission, and consumption have also changed. In the traditional mass communication model, it was known that the gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles, which decide what content will be published, belonged to the editors and presenters of the media company based on the "news value" of the news (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2022). In his work, adapting Herman and Chomsky's propaganda theories, which argue that media owners use these roles for political gain, to the Web 2.0 world, C. Fuchs states that although digital media appears to have brought about information democracy with its user-generated content and access features, it positioned "prosumers", who are both producers and consumers, as gatekeepers setting the agenda, while positioning platform owners who control algorithms with large datasets as the primary driving forces of Propaganda 2.0 (Fuchs, 2018).

Henry Jenkins, in his media convergence theory, states that Web 2.0 has not only changed media technology but also affected information production and consumption systems, drawing inspiration from Pierre Levy's 1997 statement, "No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all

¹ The final, more comprehensive version of the literature review studied in the methodology section of this article will be included in the researcher's doctoral thesis. The netnography method was also conducted as a narrow-scope pilot study for the purpose of being developed in the doctoral thesis of the researcher.

² The researcher coined the term "infoduction" by combining the words 'information' and "production" to express the production of information.

knowledge is human” (Jenkins, 2004). In his 1981 work “Simulacra and Simulation”, Jean Baudrillard predicted a digital media communication system that would transcend reality, describing alternative realities that could be defined as damaged or masked realities with the words, “We live in a world of increasing information and decreasing meaning” (Morris, 2021). In 1992, Steve Tesich first used the term “post-truth” and stated that objective reality is not more important than emotions and beliefs in the formation of public opinion, giving examples to show that the American people accept government propaganda as truth without judgment; referring to a situation in contemporary political and public debates where facts lose their validity (Çelik et al., 2024; O’Callaghan, 2019).

According to the mediatization theory, which views the media as part of daily routines and as a process that influences personal interactions and social norms, changes in culture and society shape the use of media and communication (Hepp & Krotz, 2014). In the contemporary era, where Web 2.0 and emerging communication models have shifted the information system from traditional mass media to digital platforms, information is increasingly generated and disseminated not only by academics, journalists, and authors but also by content creators, influencers, and ordinary users through conversational software supported by platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, which are further enhanced by search engines like Google and generative artificial intelligence technologies yet remain largely devoid of integrated verification mechanisms. Efforts are underway to increase digital literacy, develop fact-checking platforms, and implement pre- and post-debunking measures to build resilience against information disorder (Erdoğan et al., 2022).

The Consumption of “Wellness” as a Digital Cultural Object

Since ancient times, feeling good and being healthy have been fundamental human needs. According to Greek mythology, Asclepius, the “God of Healing,” whose temple the people of Athens visited for their mental and physical health needs, represented the healing power of the earth with his snake, which is still the symbol of modern medicine today (Savel & Munro, 2014). Hippocrates, considered the son of Asclepius and the father of modern medicine, is seen as the originator of the holistic approach to health, emphasizing the importance of nutrition, lifestyle, and environmental conditions (Baker, 2022; Savel & Munro, 2014). On the other hand, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Indian Ayurveda methods can be cited as examples of Eastern approaches to nature-based healing models. TCM emerged around 3000-2000 BC, based on the theory of balancing yin and yang energies represented by the elements of water, earth, metal, wood, and fire. These elements are related to the main bodily sensations presented as qi, blood, and body fluids, and use herbal medicines and practices such as acupuncture, qi gong, and tai chi for healing. The Ayurveda method, which emerged between 3000 and 1500 BC, similarly has a personalized balancing approach based on three energetic forces called vata, pitta, and kapha. This approach is applied as a healing method with a holistic approach that includes lifestyle rituals such as diet, exercise, yoga, and meditation (Baker, 2022).

The universal need of the post-World War II era led to the establishment of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948. Initially, this organization prioritized health needs related to survival, such as the treatment and prevention of viral diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, maternal and child health, hygiene, and nutrition (McCarthy, 2002). Unfortunately, WHO programs were not equally accessible to all people around the world. Therefore, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, left counterculture movements emerged, such as the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Hippie

Movement, and the Anti-Psychiatry movement emerged as countercultural activities that shaped today's wellness approach (Baker, 2022).

Halbert L. Dunn first used the term "wellness" and stated in his 1959 article titled "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society" that "health is much more than the absence of disease." Dunn drew attention to the necessity of self-care in the post-war period, when the industrial revolution began and people's daily lives underwent change due to the "pace of modern life" (Dunn, 1959). In 1962, the ESALEN Institute, focusing on the concept of "human potential" introduced by A. Huxley, was founded to explore the potential and values of human existence from the perspectives of behavioral sciences, religion, and philosophy using a multidisciplinary and transnational approach. This institute was inspired by American psychologist Abraham Maslow, who theorized and visualized the hierarchy of needs in a pyramid shape using a humanistic approach. This narrative groups and prioritizes human needs in a pyramid shape, starting at the bottom with basic security needs (safety, shelter), in the middle with basic physiological needs (breathing, nutrition, water, sex, sleep), above that with psychological needs (love, belonging, respect), and at the top with human needs culminating in self-actualization (Baker, 2022). In 1984, the Wellness Letter, which was published by Berkeley, defined wellness as "a preventive lifestyle for optimum physical, mental, and emotional well-being," giving individuals the responsibility to manage their own care. In 1991, the "wheel of healthy living," defined by psychologists, identified five areas of life related to self-regulation, work, love, and friendship, with spirituality at its center. Since 2014, annual Gallup surveys of the United States have used the Well-Being Index, which assesses six areas that are life evaluation, emotional health, physical health, healthy behaviors, work environment, and basic access (Kirkland, 2014). Scholar Stephanie Alice Baker, who studies media health culture, defines wellness culture in her book as "a system of beliefs, practices, and consumer products that promise to improve physical, mental, and spiritual health." Nutrition, weight management, fitness, beauty, cosmetics, anti-aging products, workplace wellness, the spa industry, wellness tourism, digital health, personalized health, alternative medicine, yoga practices, mindfulness, meditation, spirituality, etc. form the basis of the diverse wellness industry market (Baker, 2022). Although the concept of wellness is often confused with the terms health and well-being, they have similar meanings with different aspects. For example, wellness is a process of direct self-optimization that is independent of illness and therefore not directly concerned with being healthy or ill, while well-being relates to the short-term "state of being well" mentally and physically and does not address long-term health (Smith et al., 2024).

With the increasing number of scientific studies proving the effectiveness of a healthy lifestyle in preventing chronic diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, etc., interest in "wellness" topics, which include healthy eating and habits, is also growing (Cerf, 2021). According to research conducted by the Global Wellness Institute (GWI), a non-profit educational organization, the wellness market has reached a value of \$6.3 trillion with a 9% growth by 2023. This market consists of areas such as personal care and beauty, healthy eating, nutrition and weight loss, physical activity, wellness tourism, public health and prevention, personalized medicine, traditional and complementary medicine, wellness real estate, mental health, spas, thermal/mineral resources, and workplace health (Global Wellness Institute (GWI), 2024). In the context of globalization, wellness culture is also being mediatized through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube in a digitally mediatized network system. Users on these platforms, who publish or view content on

wellness topics, are positioned as “prosumers,” both producers and consumers of the information generated (Baker, 2022; Castells, 2009; Fuchs, 2014).

In times when visual digital communication did not exist, E. Goffman's theory of “Presentation of Self,” based on the metaphor of using different masks for different roles in face-to-face interactions to describe the front stage performance and the backstage analogy reflecting the person's true self, can be useful today in understanding profile presentations and interactions on social networking platforms (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Instagram, under the umbrella of wellness, provides a space in which certified professionals, accredited publishing institutions, or individuals who merely define themselves as content creators - collectively categorized as “*influencers*” - can engage in self-presentation by disseminating health-related knowledge through daily routines, recipes, physical movements, recommendations, and brand collaborations. (Denniss et al., 2023). In this context, there are personal accounts that are perceived as “experts,” “coaches,” or “gurus” on health without any scientific competence or expertise, sharing their individual diet and lifestyle preferences within the wellness movement and offering advice on nutrition and various topics to cure specific diseases and illnesses (Allen et al., 2018). Digital activist danah boyd emphasizes that social networking platforms provide spaces not only for self-presentation but also for social interaction (boyd, 2010). The trade in ignorance within the knowledge economy highlights the disinformation risks inherent in the wellness topics constructed within digital media platforms such as 21-day detox programs affected by Oprah Winfrey, practices alkaline water consumption, or the use of various supplements, which are lacking scientific evidence and experts discourage due to potential risks like nutrient deficiencies and chronic fatigue; can nevertheless be widely adopted by the masses (Mohammed, 2012). When we examine some studies conducted abroad, we observe that content emphasizing healthy living on Instagram is concentrated in the areas of nutrition, fitness, emotions, and fashion, targeting women by idealizing thinness or, more controversially, consisting of content expressing body positivity (Cavusoglu & Demirbag-Kaplan, 2017; Coffey, 2024; O'Connor, 2024). In Turkey, when we look at some studies on healthy living content on Instagram, we can say that keywords such as “diet, weight, dietitian, nutrition, online diet, diet meals, weight loss, rocket, diet” stand out in nutrition posts, that they support participatory culture, and that advertisements, primarily for personal care and beauty brands, feature in self-presentation (Aslan, 2016; Kobak, 2020; Varan et al., 2024).

Instagram and *Influencer* Economy

Instagram, owned by Meta Platforms, is a digital media platform that provides a social networking service that allows users to share photos and videos, enhance visual content with filters, categorize posts using hashtags, geotag locations, follow other users, and engage in various forms of online interaction (Wikipedia, 2025). While Instagram offers its users several advantages, such as high visual appeal, engagement, emotional attachment, commercial marketing opportunities, and viral reach, it also brings with it risky challenges such as technological limitations, the existence of fake accounts, copyright issues, and social media addiction (Fuciu, 2019). In addition to content sharing options such as editing profiles and publishing posts in visual or video format as short-term or live stories or permanently on profiles, Instagram offers account owners various features such as adding music, location, and hashtags to their posts (*How to Use Instagram: A Beginner's Guide*, n.d.). The effective use of these features is essential for creating interaction among users and increasing the time users

spend on the app, as well as for content to appear in the discovery area and increase interaction rates according to Instagram algorithms (*Instagram Algorithm: Everything You Need to Know to Ace It | SocialBu Blog*, n.d.). According to the statistics, Instagram, with over 2 billion users, 70.4% of whom are active worldwide, is the third largest digital media platform after Facebook and YouTube, while also providing its users a space to learn about brands (*The Global State of Digital in 2024 — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*, n.d.). In Turkey, Instagram, with 56.4 million users encompassing 79% of internet users and 90% of social media users, stands as the most widely used digital media platform, where advertisements reach 65.7% of the total population and 78.8% of internet users, a dynamic that has driven the influencer marketing economy to grow by 6.1% and reach a value of \$9.35 million (*Digital 2023: Turkey — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*, n.d.).

As a lifestyle-focused sharing platform, Instagram has led to the emergence of a population of “influencers” who share mostly positive content, highlight their experiences, ideas, and sometimes collaborations with featured brands, and have become semi-celebrities on the platform with large followings and high engagement rates (Kalinová & Neubergová, 2021). According to a McKinsey trend report, influencer marketing has become a reliable tool that shapes consumers' shopping preferences (*The Top Wellness Trends in 2024 | McKinsey*, n.d.). According to Fuchs's theory of participatory culture, online consumption culture generates profit in an unethical manner for some people, but it is not representative, accessible, or participatory for everyone, and the reality of the ‘sociality’ provided by social networking platforms is questioned (Barrios-O'Neill, 2015). Fuchs developed this view by introducing the concept of ‘prosumerism’, which defines social media users as free digital laborers being both producers and consumers of digital internet culture (Fuchs, 2019). On the other hand, an experimental study conducted with 700 Instagram users revealed that, within the framework of idealized beauty and influenced by influencer posts, women's bodies are objectified as digital entities and their surveillance is normalized (Sokolova et al., 2022). From the perspective of Lacan's theory of the “gaze”³, the findings of this study suggest that on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, the subject is transformed less into a freely self-presenting actor than into an object continually positioned under the gaze of the Other, whereby the female body functions not only as the source of its own imaginary wholeness but also as a “objet petit a” shaped by the desire and approval of others, thus rendering digital self-presentation a mechanism of surveillance in which the subject internalizes and normalizes the Other's gaze rather than expressing its own desire.

Methodology

This study was prepared by synthesizing a pilot netnography application conducted to be developed in a doctoral thesis with a partial literature review examining the risk of disinformation in the wellness category created by the influencer economy on Instagram. Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography that aims to deeply observe a group of people in their daily lives based on certain characteristics and utilizes online communication as a data source. Originally an anthropological qualitative research method, ethnography aims to examine a group of people's beliefs, relationships,

³ Jacques Lacan's theory of the “gaze” argues that the subject is not a dominant subject who perceives the world solely through visual perception, but rather is always positioned under the gaze of the other; in this context, the gaze passivates the subject, placing it in the position of an object and relating it to the “objet petit a”, the source of desire. Therefore, the gaze is not merely an act of seeing but possesses a psychoanalytic function that reveals the structural link between the subject's own desire and the desire of the other, confronting the subject with its lack. (Lacan et al., 2011).

and behaviors by observing them over a specific period (Naidoo, 2012). The netnography method, developed by Robert Kozinets in 2010, involves various steps such as defining the research question and the social networks or topics to be researched, entering the field by identifying and selecting the community, observing the community and collecting data in accordance with ethical standards, analyzing the data in terms of content and interpreting the findings, writing, presenting, and reporting the research findings (Özbaş Anbarlı, 2020).

Literature Review and Findings

A compilation of foreign and domestic studies that can be linked to the potential consequences of the disinformation risk associated with the wellness trend supported by the influencer economy on Instagram. Ten academic studies were identified based on the direct relevance to the topic and compliance with international academic publication criteria, following a search on Google Scholar for the keywords “wellness,” “disinformation,” “healthy eating,” “Instagram,” “influencer.” Three publications were examined using data from Turkey, one each using data from Germany, Australia, and the United States, and the remaining four studies were conducted using location-independent Instagram data.

When we look at research conducted in Turkey on health content on Instagram, we see that it mostly focuses on nutrition presentation, perceptions among users, and ethical communication. In their study analyzing the content of eight healthy living influencer accounts, Çalışır and Kılıç found that the abundance of advertising content for “diet” and “sugar-free” packaged products emphasized consumption habits rather than lifestyle habits related to healthy living (Çalışır & Aydoğan Kılıç, 2019). Another study examining dietitian influencer accounts suggests that, based on the nutritional value analysis results of 98 recipes, the fact that dessert recipes are the most shared content may lead to a misperception of healthy eating (Öksüz & İnaneroğlu, 2021). Similarly, in a qualitative analysis conducted in Turkey with 403 Nutrition and Dietetics undergraduate students from 53 universities to understand the digital media use of dietitians and students, 80.9% of the students agreed that the unethical use of digital media harms the dietitian profession because it causes risky situations such as body dissatisfaction, fear of weight gain, and pressure to be thin among followers weight gain fear, and pressure to be thin among their followers, and agreed that the unethical use of digital media harms the dietitian profession (Aktaş et al., 2023).

According to a content analysis of 105 dietary supplement products shared by influencers in Germany between 2021 and 2023, it was found that two-thirds of the products contained levels exceeding the recommended tolerable upper limit and could potentially cause toxicity (Ricke & Seifert, 2025). In Australia, a content analysis of the quality and accuracy of 676 nutrition-related posts from 47 Instagram accounts concluded that health professionals such as dietitians and doctors shared more reliable information, while dietary supplement brands and other accounts mostly disseminated disinformation, and that individuals without competence and expertise in the field of health contributed to the spread of information disorder (Denniss et al., 2024). In the United States, a content analysis of 157,000 posts from 306 influencers focusing on fitness, wellness, self-promotion, cosmetics, and appearance revealed that sponsored content had higher engagement and carried the risk of causing body dissatisfaction (Bak et al., 2023).

When we look at studies independent of geographical location, we see that content causing body dissatisfaction stands out as a risk of disinformation. In an analysis of 600 visual content pieces examining the fitspiration trend, it was shown that women's bodies were idealized by being standardized as thin and "toned" which is muscular and low in fat (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). According to an analysis of 144 visual content pieces where the hashtags #cleaneating and #eatclean, which emphasize healthy eating behaviors, were observed, it was seen that elements of femininity, muscle display, and community ownership stood out in the self-presentation of account owners (Baker & Walsh, 2018). Content analysis of three influencer accounts sharing in the food and nutrition fields revealed that health was associated with aesthetic appearance and that attention was drawn to certain eating habits and diet products (Oliveira Mota et al., 2019). Finally, based on the content analysis of 563 Instagram posts using the hashtags #studydrugs, #nootropics, #cognitiveenhancers, #smartdrugs, and #modafinil, it was argued that sales advertising, personal experience, public information, and motivation clusters were obtained, creating the feeling that positive emotions such as success and happiness could be easily achieved with these products (Petersen et al., 2021).

As result, the reviewed studies indicate that influencers producing wellness content on Instagram, a platform that offers a world of visual information, tend to idealize thin and toned bodies, promote consumption over healthy habit transformation, and highlight certain food groups in state of balanced eating principles, thereby contributing to risks of disinformation such as distorted perceptions of healthy eating practices, body dissatisfaction, and even toxicity among content consumers, while also revealing opportunities for strengthening the professional expertise of content creators and ensuring the ethical oversight of such content.

Pilot Netnography and Findings

Within the scope of this research, the Instagram accounts of three highly engaged influencers producing Turkish wellness lifestyle content were observed from a Lurker position, meaning without any interaction with themselves or their followers (Kozinets, 2001). The influencers were selected using the statistical services inbeat, boomsocial, Wednesday, and the Instagram search function. First, as found in the literature and recommended by the mentioned services searching hashtags like (#diyet #beslenme #diyetyemekleri #saglikli #fit #healthy #sagliklibeslenme #glutensiz #sekersiz #saglikliyasam #wellness #cleaneating #eatclean #fitness #egzesiz #motivasyon #isbirligi #reklam)⁴, with over 500,000 followers as of November 4, 2024, were created. Thus, it was determined that the main profile types creating wellness content for Turkey-based Instagram are entrepreneurs, media accounts, doctors, dietitians, fitness coaches, yoga instructors, health coaches, and chefs presenting themselves as such. In line with the research objectives, three female influencer Instagram accounts, which are *elvin*, *peppycooky*, and *gokcenarikan* (in Figure 1) were selected for detailed analysis within the scope of the research as they showed the highest engagement by presenting lifestyle content on topics such as food, fitness, fashion, and emotions.

⁴ English meaning of hashtags are: #diet #nutrition #dietmeals #healthy #fit # healthy #healthynutrition #glutenfree #sugarfree #healthylifestyle #wellness #cleaneating #eatclean #fitness #exercise #motivation #collaboration #advertising

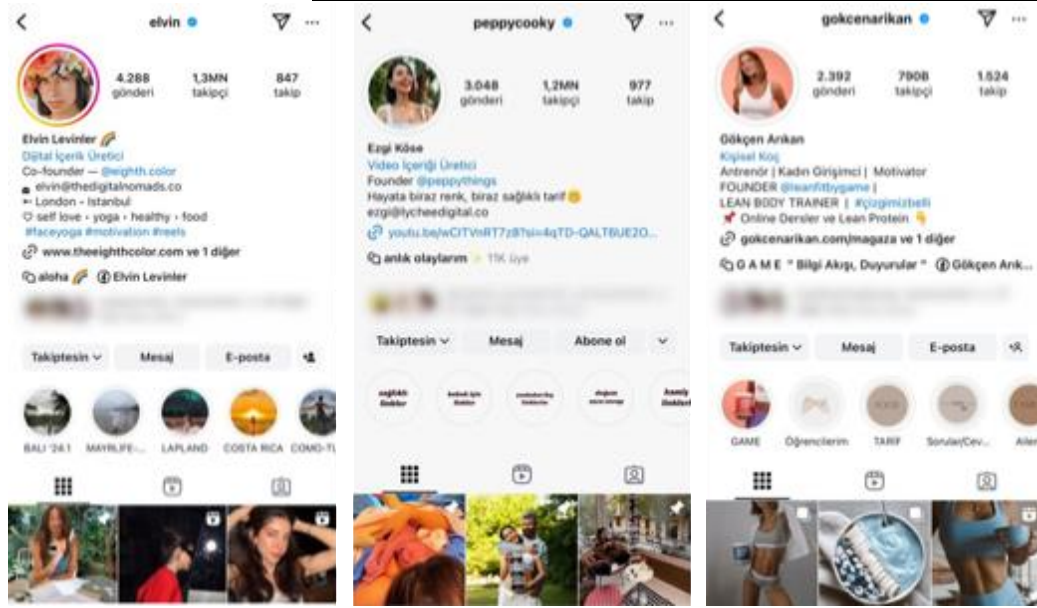


Figure 1. Profile Pages of Selected Influencers

The weekly content shared by each influencer during separate time periods was collected and analyzed. Data consisting of profile pages, daily stories, and posts were visually collected via screenshots taken on the researcher's mobile phone, transferred to the researcher's computer in .png format, and organized into folders. Using MS Excel's data validation feature, it was classified using a multiple-choice model as shown in Figure 2. Additionally, interesting elements written simultaneously from the observer's perspective, hashtags used, most frequently used words, influencers' demographic information, and the observer's comments were included in the general data coding sheet. The data consisting of 272 visuals obtained from the monitoring of influencer accounts in November-December 2024 was clustered using MS Excel's Pivot Table feature, and content analysis was performed.

Home Insert Draw Page Layout Formulas Data Review View																			
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Keep Exit New Options																			
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	image	influencer	gender	nationality	age	we	Post Time	Content	Main Cat.	Sub Cat.	Image Style	Com. Style	Accompany	Attractive Element	Engagement	Sentiment (pos./-)	hashtag used	verbal used	Comment
1	1	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 07:21	stories	MOOD	happiness	selfie	excited		nature	positive	positive			
2	2	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 08:00	stories	MOOD	motivational	ambience	friendly	friend(s)	self	positive	positive			
3	3	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/03/24 17:00	stories	FOODY	drinks	zoom in	excited		matcha	negative	negative		therapy	
4	4	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 14:00	stories	SPORT	fitness @ gym	body shot	friendly		sport wearing	polis	negative		haftaya baslarken yaptm	may cause body dissatisf
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6	6	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 19:00	stories	PROMOTION	partnerships	post sharing	excited		red color	link	negative	#trendyolmkladanaldm sbstigi		tag @trendyolmkl
7	7	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 00:00	reels	PROMOTION	partnerships	body shot	funny		clothes	comments	negative	#trendyolmkladanaldm sbstigi		narsistic
8	8	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 19:00	stories	FOODY	eating	ambience	friendly		ayurvedic menu	link	positive	#ekram	ayurvedic denier	
9	9	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/04/24 20:00	stories	PROMOTION	personal brand	product	excited		products	link	positive	#ekram	stoklar geldi	tag @height.color personal
10	10	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/05/24 00:00	reels	PROMOTION	personal brand	selfie	funny		mask	comments	positive	#ekram #collagenmask #skincare routine	evden spora	tag @height.color personal
11	11	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/05/24 07:30	stories	SPORT	walking	selfie	friendly		i-watch	positive	positive			
12	12	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/05/24 14:00	stories	SPORT	fitness @ gym	body shot	friendly		abdominal	tagging	negative			may cause body dissatisf
13	13	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/05/24 15:00	stories	SPORT	fitness @ gym	body shot	friendly		body profile	tagging	positive			
14	14	elvin	female	turkey	36	W1	11/05/24 16:00	stories	PROMOTION	partnerships	selfie	friendly		products	link	positive	#lorealpariskincare #tbt gunes kremim		tag @lorealparis

Figure 2. Classification of Data

The content analysis revealed that approximately 25% of shared content was promotional in nature, using hashtags such as #collaboration or #advertisement to generate advertising revenue, thereby directly contributing to the influencer economy. Content reflecting mood followed promotional content. It was also observed that posts on food and sports ranked third, each accounting for an equal share of 20%. Beauty tips constituted approximately 11% of the content. According to the content analysis conducted in Table 1 in terms of communication style, it was examined that the

communication style was mostly sincere, followed by an energetic tone of voice. In general, it was seen that the posts conveyed positive feelings. The data presented in [Table 2](#) analyzed the communication technique used. It was observed that long-distance shots were mostly used for promotional content and content reflecting mood, while shots focusing on the body were used for sports and beauty themes. In food content, it was found that zoom-out and zoom-in techniques were used in food preparation and presentation images to stimulate appetite.

Table 1. Content Analysis in Terms of Communication Style

	PROMOTION	MOOD	FOODY	SPORT	BEAUTY	Grand Total
friendly	30	16	23	23	5	97
energetic	13	17	16	15	16	77
excited	15	6	9	13	5	48
romantic		16	1	1	1	19
informative	4	1	6	1	1	13
funny	3	5				8
serious	1	2		3	1	7
mindful		1			1	2
hungry			1			1
Grand Total	66	64	56	56	30	272

Table 2. Content Analysis from a Communication Technique Perspective

	PROMOTION	MOOD	FOODY	SPORT	BEAUTY	Grand Total
zoom out	18	22	11	2	1	54
body shot	8	6		21	19	54
post sharing	8	4	11	14	4	41
ambiance	10	17	4	6	1	38
selfie	10	11		11	4	36
zoom in	4	1	13	2		20
food presenting	1		9			10
food preparing	1		7			8
product	6		1			7
print screen		3			1	4
Grand Total	66	64	56	56	30	272

When we examine self-presentations, the analysis of the three influencers can be summarized as follows:

- “Elvin” combines her personal story with healthy living tips such as yoga, self-care, and healthy eating. While crafting her self-presentation around the reality of an enjoyable healthy lifestyle, she engages in high-level sports. Her nutrition routine features Ayurvedic recipes and matcha consumption, and she frequently shares her facial yoga practices and products from her own cosmetics brand. She accompanies her posts with romantic moments with her husband and her cheerful attitude towards life. She adds links to shopping recommendations and advertising collaborations to her daily posts.
- “Peppycooky” interacts with her followers through daily activities, recipe sharing, family moments, personal care routines, Q&A sessions, and shopping tips. She showcases her identity through innovative recipes, appealing food visuals, healthy recipes, and creative presentations, accompanied by a positive, happy, and energetic attitude. She can turn any

situation into a positive one with humor. While highlighting sugar-free, gluten-free, and zero-waste recipe shares, she adds links to her own bag brand's products and shopping recommendations, as well as advertising collaborations, to her daily posts.

- As a fitness coach, "Gokcenarikan" often combines fitness routines with meals prepared under her own brand, emphasizing their health benefits. In her self-presentation, she highlights body transformation and strengthening to promote a holistic healthy lifestyle image. She frequently shares her own practices and her students' appearances, as well as recipes she prepares using her own brand of protein powder. She shares images from events she attends as an instructor for sports brands as part of advertising collaborations.

As a result, this analysis revealed that all three influencers share similar goals in terms of generating economic gains through brand partnerships, sponsorships, shopping links, and promoting their own brands, with the stated aim of motivating and inspiring their followers on their healthy living journeys. Most of the disinformation risks identified in the previous section's literature review on influencers producing wellness content on Instagram were also observed in the netnography study. Furthermore, in line with framing theory, influencer posts create engagement without considering the principle of personalized nutritional requirements, aiming to grow their economy and create attention-grabbing headlines. They emphasize uniform diets, disregard the accessibility of certain foods, and promote the consumption of certain foods by positioning them as "superfoods," emphasizing their consumption through "superfood" positioning, disparaging certain foods in ways that could lead to inadequate or unbalanced nutrition models, and promoting and normalizing a slim and muscular body achievable through intense exercise, thereby creating body dissatisfaction.

Discussion and Suggestions

Web 2.0 technologies have led to a shift from traditional mass media such as television, newspapers, and radio, which merely transmit messages to recipients, to digital media that provides an environment where viewers are no longer just recipients but can also participate in the information production process. Thus, with the contribution of digital "prosumers" acting as gatekeepers and agenda setters of information systems on digital media platforms, a media environment filled with the chaos of information shared within a fan culture created by followers interacting with content has been constructed. Therefore, the free digital labor offered by producing consumers within the participatory culture framework advocated by Fuchs (Fuchs, 2014) has now lost its validity. This is because it is understood that they earn financial gains in return for the content they produce on digital media platforms, both from sponsored content sharing and from having created their own brands.

This study, conducted via Instagram, which facilitates visual and fluid information sharing, demonstrates that this platform has become an important source of information on wellness topics today. It proposes the hypothesis that disinformation is not limited to the information conveyed; self-presentations on these platforms, where the flow of information is managed by the influencer economy centered on algorithms, can also be a source and lead to the trade of ignorance. As E. Goffman's theory of "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," defended for face-to-face communication, can be adapted to communication on digital media platforms (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), although Instagram is used by influencers as a stage for front-of-house performances with content that aligns with their profiles and the purpose of their accounts, they also present many individual moments considered to be behind the scenes, such as their private lives,

emotional states, daily routines, makeup-free appearances, and difficult moments. This situation, related to surveillance psychology, leads to growth in their economies by promoting follower interactions and algorithms, while also increasing the backstage theme in content sharing plans and causing this content to be included in the information pool of platform users. In this regard, this study argues that disinformation can consist not only of information conveyed by content creators through text or images, but also of information perceived by content consumers because of reading and viewing actions. It is suggested that influencer accounts have become a media publishing medium and, therefore, need to apply ethical publishing principles. Since determining the accuracy of health-related content may require expertise in health sciences, this study proposes that, rather than assigning tasks such as digital literacy to users to check the accuracy of information to build resilience to disinformation, responsibility should be given to platform owners and advertisers to structure influencer economies and apply ethical principles.

This study can be expanded primarily through a more comprehensive literature review and netnography, spread over a longer period, and through the analysis of data obtained from more accounts. The risk of disinformation can be calculated using quantitative methods by analyzing follower interactions or applying survey methods. Qualitative and quantitative studies conducted on follower profiles can prove the hypotheses presented.

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