Down the rabbit hole: Disinformation, conspiracy and enjoyment

Harry Browne

Technological University Dublin
E-mail: harry.browne@tudublin.ie

Abstract

Research on disinformation, spanning academic and civil-society sectors, has already been subject to several critiques of its utility, purpose and epistemology, discussed and categorised here. The current paper utilises a review of literature, including from psychology, critical theory and the humanities, to introduce an approach that acknowledges and addresses the largely neglected dimensions of positive affect, aesthetics and creativity that characterise individual and group engagement with false and conspiratorial information – the enjoyment that such engagement brings. Addressing the bias towards positivism in disinformation studies, it proposes that an understanding of such narrative pleasures offers potentially fruitful means of combatting falsehoods. 'Down the rabbit hole' is thus understood not simply as (in its most common usage today) a metaphor for grim obsession; but rather, as Lewis Carroll first depicted it in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* as a place of imaginative encounter, connection, and revelation, a place to become 'curiouser and curiouser'.

Keywords: disinformation, conspiracy, enjoyment, affective networking, media literacy.

Introduction / Uvod

The current paper is an initial phase in a wider project to theorise, contest and renew discussions in the field of dis-/misinformation and conspiracy theory, and of the harms associated with those phenomena. It seeks to do so in part by categorising and assessing existing critical approaches to the field; but also by exploring a largely neglected dimension to the phenomena that may prove more constructive than those existing critiques in improving counter-disinformation efforts. This dimension relates to the positive affects associated with individual and group 'vulnerability' to and participation in the creation and dissemination of false and conspiratorial information. The paper draws upon diverse literature to propose that aesthetic and narrative aspects of such information is vital to understanding its appeal; and that far from 'offering simple answers to complicated questions', conspiratorial ideation is a complex, creative and often-pleasurable process – and this helps explain why it cannot be fact-checked away.

As will be noted below, emotion and affect have not been absent from the literature about disinformation; but the discussion has tended to focus on 'bad actors' who exploit negative feelings and experiences that make information consumers vulnerable to distortions and inventions. The purpose of this work is to go beyond the version of emotional vulnerability that starts and finishes with alienation, anger and anxiety, and to look instead at enjoyment.

The current paper takes the form principally of a literature review – one that is of necessity trans-disciplinary and drawn largely but not exclusively from academic articles and books in a field that transcends some of the normal categories: journalists weigh in frequently in this field, as do thinktank researchers and even state officials in a host of non-peer-reviewed books and studies, along with public intellectuals in popular media. The author is a long-time journalist and more recent entrant into the field of media and information literacy (for example, Brennan & Browne, 2021), and it must be acknowledged that the disinformation field also has opened some turf battles (Frau-Meigs, 2022). Transdisciplinarity, and disciplinary battle lines, can be a source of confusion for any researcher, but the cross-pollination should ultimately be fruitful for all of us. For the purposes of developing the ideas herein, literature that precedes, ignores and/or transcends the disinformation field – however that field might be boundaried – is consulted liberally. This includes work from critical theory, psychology and the humanities. By no means is the literature within disinformation studies reviewed exhaustively, and the sample is skewed somewhat toward important recent work from the author's home country of Ireland.

This work should not be taken as simply an addition to the 'post-truth' side of the balance-sheet of contemporary political-communications analysis, nor as exemplifying 'the emotional turn' in social research. While emotions have earned more sympathy in recent media studies (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), too often the emotional turn constitutes a dramatisation, or a journalistic storytelling approach, that permits the researcher and the reader to ignore socio-structural roots of the questions being addressed. Moreover, 'feelings' are not fully explanatory in and by themselves; and if we ascribe them power, as we should, the ascription cannot be limited to their effect on the vulnerable 'other'. Like alienation and anger, enjoyment is something we must be prepared to see in our own cognitive work as well as that of others: there is nothing to be gained from studying the role of affect only, in the end, to pathologise and depoliticise the people we study. The current paper is a first step in developing a conception of the politics at the intersection of information and pleasure that goes beyond individual psychology; and an attempt to add to a contemporary politics of emotion that includes but goes beyond lamentation at and critique of how online media, in particular, exploit and manipulate affect in the pursuit of profit (Dean, 2005; Kahneman, 2011; Zuboff, 2019).

Part 2 of this paper will address and categorise what the author regards as the most important extant critiques of the disinformation field, locating them in three broad categories, using a different typology from the one outlined by Carmago and Simon (2022). In the author's view, these critiques are necessary but not sufficient, neither for understanding the shortcomings of this young field of research nor for moving forward constructively, given that genuinely harmful false ideas and

information are disseminated in our societies. (I will return to the threat of the far right and its link to ideas drawn from, and about, disinformation in the concluding section.) Part 3 will introduce a new critique, by examining critically the focus on 'better thinking' that emerges from research that seeks to address disinformation and conspiratorial ideation, and the tendency there to view emotion as a negative factor to be overcome. Part 4 will use Lewis Carroll to introduce the idea that 'going down the rabbit hole' has been partly misconstrued (often understandably) as a metaphor only for often-grim obsession rather than for creative and collaborative exploration, before drawing on a number of other key thinkers who have attempted to analyse emotion and enjoyment with political tools, from Raymond Williams' famous 'structures of feeling' to Frederic Lordon's 'structuralism of passions'. Part 5 will introduce intriguing and somewhat counter-intuitive psychological research on emotions and gullibility and relate it to vulnerability to disinformation, before a number of concluding remarks about the implications of the work.

Typology of critiques / Tipologija kritika

The present decade has seen a considerable backlash against research and advocacy focussing on disinformation, with the Covid-19 pandemic – with concomitant social-distancing restrictions and then vaccines – serving as one among several spheres where the arguments have played out. Much, though by no means all, of the critique it has emanated from those on the US political right who have seen the field as being constructed to delegitimise their views and political positions; this conflict played out predictably when the Biden administration was forced to abandon its plans for a 'disinformation governance board', and a New York Times caption lamented archly that its would-be leader 'Nina Jankowicz became a target of disinformation while leading a new Department of Homeland Security advisory board on the issue' (Myers and Sullivan, 2022).

The backlash, however, has had a number of serious and reputable advocates of its own, and their views cannot readily be ignored. The present paper reflects briefly and broadly on a number of the critiques, and proposes a typology of them. Like most typologies, it oversimplifies at times and does not account for considerable overlap as well as uncategorisable tangents. Nonetheless, it proposes that there are fundamentally three categories of critique addressing themselves to what some call derisively 'the disinformation industry': the first relates to its alleged role in a moral panic around uncontrollable media consumption and social media in particular, including what is seen as an unwarranted defence of legacy news media; the second relates to the role of counter-disinformation in creating a regulatory pretext, in consonance and cooperation with state and corporate actors seeking to monitor and censor online activity; and a third set of critiques have focussed on the definitional and epistemological challenges faced by research that assumes the stability and certainty of true 'information'.

These three categories might be more broadly characterised as coming from, respectively, media critics; journalists of a civil-libertarian orientation; and philosopher/theorists – though, again, there is considerable overlap and exception.

a. Media-centric critiques / Kritike usmjerene na medije

The media critics' critique is perhaps most dramatically embodied in Jack Bratich's 2020 journal article, which provocatively in its title called the 'misinformation' campaign both a 'moral panic' and a 'war of restoration' for traditional elites, mainly but not only in media – part of a pushback against the democratic excesses of the internet and citizen journalism, in the context of a severely weakened journalism industry (Bratich, 2020) (see also Hauser, 2019; Cullinane, 2022). Although Bratich's argument spans across all the categories of the present typology, and indeed beyond, it belongs especially in this media-centric slot because of its main theoretical contribution: the expansion of the concept of a primary definer – in the original Stuart Hall conception of moral panic these constituted the people relied upon by journalists to set the legitimate parameters of societal debate (Hall et al., 1978) – to include professional journalists themselves, now primary definers in the pursuit of a moral-panic war on 'insurgent communications' (Bratich, 2020, 324).

Other critiques in this vein are not quite so animated or animating, but nonetheless point to the idea that disinformation and fake news have been constructed as what Farkas, drawing on research interviews with Danish journalists, calls 'the ultimate other' of mainstream journalism (Farkas, 2023b, 2023a). Harjuniemi (2022, 271) argues that 'the 21st-century media market… disrupts established liberal gate-keeping institutions, such as journalism' and that disinformation discourses are symptomatic of that disruption. Even recent scholarship that is not ostensibly in alignment with this critique does tend to give it some support: Horowitz et al. (2022), for example, paint a picture of public-service broadcasters in the Czech Republic, Finland, Spain and Britain whose visible 'counter-disinformation' campaigns mostly boil down to a plea to 'trust us'. Similar conclusions have been drawn from research on the public-service broadcaster in Ireland (Cullinane, 2022).

Philosopher Frédéric Lordon criticises 'fake news' narratives along similar lines:

Surprise, surprise: the columnists' philosophising over 'post-truth' reaches the conclusion that they should exercise a moral tutelage over public discourse – and particularly that of the people and 'populists'…. Without doubt, the argument here has nothing to do with the fundamental need to establish the facts correctly, but instead the media's overwhelming post-Trump symptom of self-justification, to which end they almost entirely fall back on the fact of having fulfilled their fact-checking duties. (Lordon, 2017)

A well-researched journalistic article, which pursues mainly this argument about journalistic backlash and self-justification, credibly adds an additional dimension that fits into this media-centric category: that the war on disinformation has exaggerated the persuasive impact of what people see on social media in ways that are consonant with the advertising-sales imperatives of social-media companies themselves:

Zuckerberg's company profits by convincing advertisers that it can standardize its audience for commercial persuasion. How could it simultaneously claim that people aren't persuaded by its content? Ironically, it turned out that the big social-media platforms shared a foundational premise with their strongest critics in the disinformation field: that platforms have a unique power to influence users, in profound and measurable ways. (Bernstein, 2021)

b. Regulatory-pretext critiques / Kritike regulatornog izgovora

The second category of critique, coming broadly from activists and journalists exercised about civil liberties, views anti-disinformation research and advocacy as a vehicle for states, and companies, seeking to reinforce and expand their powers to surveil and censor. This critique has come to the fore in 2023 and presently constitutes the most widely visible form of 'anti-anti-disinformation' argument. Elon Musk's release of Twitter internal documents to a number of journalists was a stimulus to the idea of a 'censorship-industrial complex'; in critics' view, this comprises an ad-hoc network of state agencies, as well as researchers in universities and thinktanks, whose disinformation-fighting duties have included the identifying of potential misinformation actors with the intention of getting them removed, demonetised or de-amplified on social media (Taibbi et al., 2023). Along with Matt Taibbi and other Twitter Files reporters, prominent journalists such as Glenn Greenwald are also associated with this critique, which lacks, to date, the same status in peer-reviewed literature as the first one (though Bratich's wide-ranging polemic incorporates elements of it). Google whistleblower and data scientist Jack Poulson has lent support to this critique, stating: 'the two narratives of counter-disinformation and counter-human trafficking are used as the primary public justifications for the social media surveillance, cellphone location-tracking, facial recognition, and modernized human intelligence industries' (Taibbi and Poulson, 2023).

As with Bernstein's long 2021 article in the respected Harper's magazine, discussed above, this censorship-centric category of critique also includes a long, deeply researched and profoundly angry magazine article in a reputable publication: Jacob Siegel's 13,000-word essay on the 'hoax of the century' in The Tablet, self-described as a Jewish magazine. Siegel concludes: 'To a ruling class that had already grown tired of democracy's demand that freedom be granted to its subjects, disinformation provided a regulatory framework to replace the U.S. Constitution' (Siegel, 2023). The substantial critiques in this category to date are US-oriented, and tend toward somewhat hyperbolic characterisation of that country as governed by a ostensibly liberal 'ruling class' that believes, to quote Siegel, 'in informational and management solutions to existential problems' and in their 'own providential destiny and that of people like them to rule, regardless of their failures' (Siegel, 2023).

c. Epistemological critiques / Epistemološke kritike

While the previous two sets of critiques might be seen as relating primarily to the milieu of disinformation research – its social field, supporters, sponsors and bedfellows – the final category relates to its definitional and domain shortcomings and generally unspoken assumptions about information, truth and meaning.

This critique should come as no surprise to anyone at work in the area, where even a neutral review of literature from 2018 had to conclude that disinformation was

> a term used to encompass a wide range of types of information about politics found online, including "fake news," rumors, deliberately factually incorrect information, inadvertently factually incorrect information, politically slanted information, and "hyperpartisan" news. (Tucker et al., 2018, 2)

A recent report from an Irish government disinformation working group proposed that it might be desirable to dispense entirely with arguing claims

about truth and intent (i.e. 'deliberately factually incorrect'), and simply define disinformation in terms of 'overall harms' caused to various social goods (*National Counter Disinformation Strategy Subgroup 1 Report: Countermeasures*, 2023, 3).

What use can be served by a term with such a range of loosely connected meanings, each opening another can of worms? In this category of critique, theorists may also ask whether the idea of disinformation confers an unwarranted, Cold-War-inflected sense of authority, without in any sense improving on more precise terms about information, such as calling it unverified, rumour, propaganda, speculation, etc. (And of course, yesterday's misinformation may become today's news: at least one study from early 2021 measured vulnerability to misinformation by the proxy of belief that a person might still get Covid-19 despite being vaccinated (Thomas and Darling, 2021).) One east-European scholar of propaganda argues that a great deal of research was done in what has become the 'disinformation' field long before the term emerged in the last decade, by critical scholars of public relations and strategic communications (Tsetsura, 2023). Writer Sam Adler-Bell sympathetically embraces the epistemological (and other) critiques of the vogue for disinformation research, calling it is a 'fantasy' that 'turned a political problem into a scientific one' (Adler-Bell, 2022).

Other scholars have argued that critiques centred on disinformation misread the fundamental speculative and inauthentic nature of political 'pitching' – turning 'disinformation' accusations into a badge of honour for some activists (McKelvey et al., 2023); or that they, like conspiracy theories themselves, 'overfit' information and therefore misconstrue the fundamentally aesthetic and ironic aspects of communication that mean all information implies and contains its opposite (Green, 2023). Still others argue against the assumptions of typical media literacy efforts against disinformation and in favour of what they call an 'ecological literacy' that

> doesn't fight against the affordances of the information ecosystem. It doesn't assume that falsehoods are easily decontaminated by the application of facts, or indeed, that falsehoods are the only pollutants to worry about. It doesn't cast people as atomistic islands unto themselves. Instead, ecological literacy emerges from network complications.... And it takes people's frames seriously. These frames might not be true, but they are real. (Milner and Phillips, 2020, 24)

Beyond 'stop and think' / Iznad 'stani i razmisli'

The summarised sets of critiques have varying but acknowledged strengths and importance. The first two sets, in particular, have an undesirable tendency, however, to dispose of the baby with the bathwater, while the imperative for more robust theoretical work demanded by the third set cannot constitute an end-point for discussion.

Whether we call it disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, fake news or conspiracy theory, the loose but linked concepts that are the object of so much attention describe phenomena that are relevant to our politics and societies, as are the efforts to counter them. They affect popular attitudes and approaches to public health, foreign policy, migration, climate, and other important topics; they are, as so many researchers insist, relevant to contemporary political formations, especially on the far right. In this paper, the argument is not to ignore disinformation, but to suggest that both disinformation itself and efforts to combat it are under-theorised in terms of their affective dimensions – communal, mimetic, libidinal – in terms of *enjoyment*.

This is especially important given that the (worthy) mission of much disinformation research and advocacy is not simply to understand the phenomenon, but to inform campaigns that address the issue with the public in ways that do not simply involve the removal from online platforms of offending content. As far as we can see from the best efforts to evaluate such public-awareness campaigns against disinformation and conspiratorial ideation, they are not working very well (O'Mahony et al., 2023). Many of them amount to interventions that enjoin audiences to 'stop and think' when confronted with suspect information. Apart from this phrase constituting perhaps the most common, and frequently ignored, advice offered by humans to each other throughout history, it constitutes a faith in the direct application of cognition that is unsupported by research. Nevertheless, even a systematic review of the ineffectiveness of such interventions suggests hopefully that if mere thinking does not work, people should be encouraged to think harder, with programmes that entail 'fostering effortful thought' (O'Mahony et al., 2023, 3). Psychological research suggests, however, that thinking is an undesirable activity, especially this version of individualised, prophylactic cognition (Wilson et al., 2014).

Bad thinking, or 'vulnerability to disinformation', among most scholars, is generally reduced to cognitive fallacies, especially 'confirmation bias', the tendency to choose and shape information to confirm prior beliefs. One scholar, writing in a journalistic setting, refers to the conspiracist failure of 'cognitive mapping' of 'the social totality' – though he also recognises the 'stimulating fantasy' of conspiracy (Hannah, 2023). The main emotions and affects that register in most literature about disinformation and conspiracy are paranoia, anxiety, fear and anger, sometimes recognised as at least partly justified in the case of poor and marginalised people, manipulated by 'bad actors' (Culloty and Suiter, 2021). Even with the best – or at least most compassionate – of intentions, many researchers are inclined to endorse and advance the conclusion that vulnerability to conspiracy and disinformation is a consequence of 'unmet psychological needs' for some unfortunate other people (Gallagher, 2022, 341). Scholarship that acknowledges the need to meet political emotion on its own terrain, rather than attempting to out-think it, nonetheless emphasise the negative: 'Instead of bemoaning the influx of emotions into politics, we should value democracy's capacity to give voice to fear, pain, and anxiety that might otherwise be diverted in far more destructive directions'. (Davies, 2018, 14). Naomi Klein suggests that 'conspiracy theorists get the facts wrong but often get the *feelings* right... the feeling that every human misery is someone else's profit, the feeling of being exhausted by predation and extraction, the feeling that important truths are being hidden' (Klein, 2023, 272, emphasis in original).

A small slice of the literature on disinformation, however, points gently in the direction of pleasure. Tim Hwang, writing in a NATO publication, suggests that users may share 'disinformation and misinformation' online not because of any genuine persuasion inherent in it – he cites 'the widespread sharing of crude [sic] edited photographs and other "cheapfakes"' – but because it fits with a 'group identity' or pre-conceived narrative (Hwang, 2020, 18) And Hannah points, albeit in a sort of emotional paradox, to 'the *jouissance* in surrendering fully to the paranoia and anxiety of conspiracy' (Hannah, 2023).

Feeling and enjoyment / Osjećaj i uživanje

This section explores the idea that the forms of cognition involved in people's attraction to dubious or 'alternative' information needs can be analysed further in terms of their positive affective and collective dimensions, rather than as a failure of thinking. To do so, it begins with the suggestion that going 'down the rabbit hole', which has taken on an image of dark obsessiveness, is open to a more nuanced and more illuminating understanding – including by way of its origins. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll's young heroine is often exasperated at the complications she encounters once she has followed the White Rabbit downwards; but Wonderland is certainly no place for simple solutions to complex problems, or even of being 'pilled' to the fundamental awfulness of reality. Down the rabbit hole (the title of Carroll's first chapter) is, rather, the route to a world full of puzzles, exploration, frustration, connection and revelation, summarised by a neologism that describes both the locale and Alice herself: 'Curiouser and curiouser' (Carroll, 1865, 7).

Carroll's Wonderland is a treasure trove of prescient metaphors for the risks and pleasures of online life, told with a mathematician's sense of the limits of rationality. (Carroll, whose real name was Charles Dodgson, taught mathematics.) The Mock Turtle explains to Alice 'the different branches of Arithmetic' with a pun that doubles as a summary of life online: 'Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision' (Carroll, 1865, 67). The Duchess tells a story the moral of which is the Instagram-able 'Be what you would seem to be' (Carroll, 1865, 63). And, perhaps most memorably, in Carroll's sequel, Humpty Dumpty summarises his literal mastery of language with a statement that might be made by someone particularly enjoying a Facebook argument: 'When I use a word,… it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less' (Carroll, 1872, 81).

As Todd McGowan has argued, drawing on Spinoza, such enjoyment is reliant neither on knowledge nor even on virtue – or, at least, not on their direct and 'rational' application. He is worth quoting at length:

> More knowledge can augment the amount of enjoyment that subjects obtain from their disavowal of what they know. Campaigns of information give the subject more opportunity for sacrificing this knowledge in self-destructive acts, and it is sacrifice that produces enjoyment. As anyone who has enjoyed potato chips or a piece of cake knows, the knowledge that these foods are physiologically harmful doesn't detract from the enjoyment of them but augments it. The same logic is at work in politics…. Rather than trying to do what is good for us, we are trying to find a way to enjoy ourselves. If I know that a candidate or political position will harm my own interest, this makes supporting them all the more enjoyable, provided that I can disavow the knowledge of this harm and avoid openly confronting it. Just as with junk food, I enjoy how the political position introduces an excess that disturbs the good into my existence…. Enjoyment is an affective response to a situation, not the result of what one knows about one's situation…. When we attack an emotional response with knowledge, we do nothing to allay the strength of the emotional response. (McGowan, 2022, 71–72)

McGowan sees a great deal of political enjoyment located in what he construes as reactionary narratives about identified enemies, which become engrained as beliefs and forms of belonging. As Raymond Williams explained, to define, address and analyse 'structures of feeling' is not to wallow in individual psychology, nor is it to treat feeling and thinking as separate mental and social categories, but rather as interconnected via social experience:

not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics…. (Williams, 1977, 132)

Frédéric Lordon has theorised a 'structuralism of passions'. 'Irrelevant affective considerations,' Lordon writes, 'can interfere with knowledge attained by the light of reason…. The error consists in supposing ourselves already liberated from the servitude to the passions' (Lordon, 2022, 295).

Crucially, the internet, with its vast archives and limitless lines of argument, constitutes a version of Wonderland where such passions can be engaged in creative and collaborative forms of connection making. Boris Groys calls it 'submedial space' – which

necessarily remains for us the dark space of suspicion, speculations, and apprehensions – but also that of sudden epiphanies and cogent insights. Indeed, we inevitably suspect manipulation, conspiracy, and intrigue lurking behind the surface of signs presented by public archives and the media. …the observer of the medial surface hopes that the dark, hidden, submedial space at some point reveals, betrays, divulges itself for what it is. (Groys, 2012, 13)

The popular Italian writer of fiction and non-fiction who uses the *nom de plume* Wu Ming 1 has written extensively about what he calls 'conspiracy fantasies', which he regards as deviated forms of social protest (Wu Ming 1, 2021). However, he says he regards most of the debunking approaches to disinformation and conspiracy as futile precisely because they neglect the creative and community-making pleasures that lurk in the submedial space. As a novelist who has himself written in collaboration with others, he says: 'At some level, people like Alex Jones are colleagues of mine' (Wu Ming 1, personal communication, 18 May 2023).

Vulnerability and gullibility / Ranjivost i lakovjernost

The work of Joseph Forgas, whose research focuses on gullibility in social psychology rather than directly on disinformation and conspiratorial ideation, nonetheless provides a particularly intriguing insight into the relationship between affect and 'vulnerability'. Contrary to the miserable portrait of the disaffected and lonely internet-user 'going down the rabbit hole' that emerges from so much literature, his research points to a mutually reinforcing relationship between *positive* affect and gullibility. To quote his concise and rather direct summary of one of many similar results from an extensive series of studies: 'positive mood increased bullshit receptivity, impaired recall, but also produced greater self-confidence' (Forgas, 2019, 184).

This is not to say that all conspiracy theorists are happy, of course; but it does suggest that enjoyment is consonant in important ways with the cognitive tendencies that would lead a person or group to believe, confidently, in things that are not true. And conversely, it is negative mood that may 'function as a subconscious warning signal, producing a more cautious and critical evaluation of information' (Forgas, 2019, 179).

It is important to note that the Forgas school of gullibility research – he has many followers and colleagues (see for example the edited collection Forgas &

Baumeister, 2019) – relates to transient states, not to long-term affective tendencies, let alone diagnosed ones. Nonetheless, his findings about the link between positive mood and gullibility span a number of different forms of information processing and reception, from believing 'bullshit' to the non-retention of data that has actually been witnessed directly. Conversely,

> negative mood has a dual effect on credulity, increasing accuracy and discrimination, and also producing a stricter and more conservative criterion for acceptance....
> In addition to priming negative information and increasing overall skepticism, negative affect also produced a specific advantage in sensitivity to detect fake, false, or misleading information and deception.
> ... negative mood almost completely eliminated eyewitness gullibility and the incorrect infusion of planted, misleading details into recall and recognition memory. (Forgas, 2019, 188–192)

Positive moods, however, 'signal familiarity and safety and tend to produce a more benign, confident, and optimistic interpretation of complex social information, and reduced levels of suspiciousness' (Forgas, 2019, 191). The precise use of Forgas's findings in the disinformation field is a difficult puzzle: one certainly does not wish to design an anti-disinformation intervention that implants negative moods in a population. However, it may encourage us to observe and theorise more carefully about what we see in social media and message boards where conspiracy theorists gather to trade ideas: this shared activity, insofar as it is pleasurable, induces affects that reinforce participants' psychological likelihood to believe untruths. Forgas invites us, nonetheless, to view affect not as an intruder set to wreck the rational basis of the social order, but rather as an adaptation that in different circumstances, and depending on the mood, can either lubricate the exchange of information, or introduce an important dimension of scepticism.

Conclusion / Zaključak

In mid-2023, as a first draft of this paper was being written, social media, message boards and the comments sections on various blogs were abuzz with speculative conspiracies about 'the Wagner coup' in Russia. Whether the participants were pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian (these are largely mutually exclusive online networks), Occam's famous razor was getting little use: instead, new assumptions and presumptively secret information was being introduced at every turn. Participants introduced tales from history and fiction as explanatory analogues, then quickly turned them into the bases for a next phase of speculation. Quoting each other, arguing and 'correcting', users developed collaborative stories of staggering inefficiency and implausibility, and the enjoyment was palpable.

Someone such as Alex Jones is, of course, merely an apex conspirator. The ongoing work by countless thousands of such collaborators in the submedial space is a vital part of the work of building conspiratorial cultures and communities, where traditional divides of 'creator' and 'audience' are eroded. And as with Jones, often denounced as a cynical showman, the question of 'honest belief' lurks in these spaces. How many participants are 'trolling' or 'shitposting'? Is there, for at least some people, an exercise of performative fluency in making and spreading such information in which the truth claims attached to it are completely incidental? Is it all enjoyment?

Such questions, essentially of sincerity and trust in the realms of disinformation and conspiracy, are for future consideration; this paper has not dealt directly with the more familiar and related questions of how disinformation 'flows', and the undoubted reality of direct and deliberate malfeasance in the seeding and spreading of false beliefs. Similarly, the oft-heard parallels between conspiracy belief and religion, with the likes of Q-Anon often called as a millenarian cult, are relevant to any wider project of analysing and theorising the affective and communal pleasures that are common to such spaces. In addition, future work will further pursue the metaphor of the rabbit hole to ask whether, down there, the concept of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) is a fruitful one for comprehending and theorising the network shapes and effects of conspiracy and misinformation.

The intellectual and political stakes are high. As the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers warns, good research should avoid 'the distribution of guilt and innocence to be an aim in itself' – adding that 'a milieu obsessed by a stable distinction being established between remedy and poison is a milieu that empoisons' (2015, 103). In addition, she embraces the reality of 'entanglement' of 'facts' and values' over the illusion of separating them for the purpose of a pseudo-scientific hierarchy of reified facts (Stengers, 2018, 17). Meanwhile, on the political side, analysis of disinformation and its publics is not the same thing as analysis of the far right and its followers – but the distinction is not always obvious in the literature. This is, in part, symptomatic of the definitional deficiencies and 'mission creep' that characterise a young field, but it is also understandable. Indeed, the current paper, with its emphasis on the aesthetic and affective attractions of disinformation, owes a great deal to a century of scholarship on the psychology of fascism, 'understood as a psychic and libidinal phenomenon, as well as a socio-political one' (Toscano, 2023, 18).

Nonetheless, doing this kind of research should mean identifying the temptations that exist on 'our side'. Work still to be done includes close examination of how anti-disinformation discourse, even in the form of reputable research, may itself be subject to the same overfitting of narratives, enemy-identification, dubious truth-claims and forms of collective enjoyment that characterise the objects of its criticism. As Naomi Klein writes:

> we are ensnared in a web of life-annihilating lies…. As the house collapses, some people choose to take flight into full-blown fantasy, sure – but that doesn't mean that the rest of us who were also born and raised in that house are guardians of the truth. (Klein, 2023, 299)

In addition to recognising the conspiracist within, it is also important that when countering what we may see as the 'disinformation worldview', and in the guise of truth-guardians, we do not present an alternative vision that seems bereft of curiosity and enjoyment. One important researcher – employed by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue and author of a well-received book (Gallagher, 2022) – has written on Twitter: 'Conspiracy theory belief ignores the fact that the world is random and that humans are all individuals with their own thoughts' (Gallagher, 2021). It is striking that in the name of countering disinformation, such an excellent researcher presents as 'fact' that we live in a world of disconnection and isolation, one where it is apparently futile to seek causes, order and meaning.

Undoubtedly there are societal dangers in the elaborate conspiracies borne of reactionary enjoyment. The response to them may need to have its own aesthetic

and affective dimensions, beyond the clinical insistence on facticity, the dull promise that facts speak (only) for themselves. To acknowledge enjoyment and emotion is not the same as to embrace irrationality; to know, politically, is to feel, to empathise, and therefore be able to persuade. In order to empathise, it is necessary to respect rather than resist 'the crucial role played by passions and affects in securing allegiance to democratic values' (Mouffe, 2000, 95); such empathetic persuasion demands that we 'feel viscerally connected to the lives and interests of other people' (Mussell, 2017, 143). As the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal wrote nearly a half-century ago: 'A good empathy does not prevent understanding and, on the contrary, needs understanding precisely to prevent the spectacle's turning into an emotional orgy.' He added: 'Learning is an emotional experience, and there is no reason to avoid such emotions' (Boal, 1979/2019, 85).

Dis-, mis- and otherwise mal-informational fantasies can surely be contested with better stories and deeper, more empathetic forms of enjoyment. The only way through is down.

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Niz zečju rupu: dezinformacije, teorije urote i uživanje

Harry Browne
Tehnološko sveučilište, Dublin
E-mail: harry.browne@tudublin.ie

Sažetak

Istraživanje dezinformacija, koje obuhvaća akademski i civilnodruštveni sektor, već je bilo predmetom nekoliko kritika njihove korisnosti, svrhe i epistemologije, o kojima se ovdje raspravlja i koje se ovdje kategorizira. Ovaj rad koristi se pregledom literature, uključujući i onu iz psihologije, kritičke teorije i humanističkih znanosti, kako bi predstavio pristup koji prepoznaje i razmatra uglavnom zanemarene dimenzije pozitivnog afekta, estetike i kreativnosti koje obilježavaju individualni i skupni angažman s lažnim i zavjereničkim informacijama – užitak koji takav angažman može pružiti. Upozoravajući na pristranost prema pozitivizmu u studijama o dezinformacijama, rad predlaže da razumijevanje takvih narativnih užitaka može pružiti potencijalno obećavajuće načine za suzbijanje neistina. „Zečja rupa" se stoga ne shvaća samo kao metafora za sumornu opsesiju (kako se najčešće koristi danas), nego, kako ju je Lewis Carroll prvotno prikazao u Alisinim avanturama u zemlji čudesa, kao mjesto maštovitog susreta, povezivanja i otkrivenja, mjesto gdje se postaje „sve znatiželjnije i znatiželjnije".

Ključne riječi: dezinformacija, zavjera, uživanje, afektivno umrežavanje, medijska pismenost