



# Defining an operational definition of disinformation through the fact- checking: toward a new epistemocratic order?

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Online disinformation: an integrated view | #1 Defining and Measuring Disinformation

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## Introduction

We are happy to attend to this conference which questions the observing and the measuring of disinformation. In this communication, we pay attention to the definition of disinformation in the particular political context of "Gilets Jaunes" crisis ("Yellow Vests" crisis), which is a strong protest against media, journalists and the French government.

The operational definition of disinformation through fact-checking is an info-communication problem that also raises epistemological questions that, if not addressed, lead to the temptation of "epistocracy". In this study, the philosophical approach makes it possible to deconstruct and question concepts and references. It is associated with an approach based on media studies that pays attention to communication phenomena in their socio-political stakes. For this presentation, we will only consider the falsehood of information according to the classification established by Wardle and Derakhshan to describe "information disorder" (Wardle et Derakhshan 2017). As a result, we will alternately use the terms "disinformation" or "misinformation" to refer to these false pieces of information without assuming whether they are intentional or not.

Fact-checking is an antidote to misinformation. It sorts, gives evidence, but is this enough to convince the target audience? Fact-checking cures symptoms but does it not to address the causes of disinformation and misinformation?

Defining an operational definition of misinformation and disinformation through the fact-checking is therefore a delicate operation that leads to considering the multiple facets of the question: epistemological, communicational, political.

The issue will be examined in the specific French context of the so-called "Yellow Vests" crisis. The Yellow Vests movement - named after the yellow high visibility vests worn by demonstrators - is initially an unstructured protest movement that emerged in France in October 2018. This spontaneous social movement has its origin in the dissemination, mainly on social networks, of calls to demonstrate against the increase in the domestic consumption tax on energy products (TICPE). From 17 November 2018, the protest is organized around road blocks and roundabouts and demonstrations every Saturday. These protests mainly mobilize residents of rural and peri-urban areas, but are also organized in metropolitan areas, where several violent episodes occur, particularly on Avenue des Champs-Élysées. Quickly, the movement's demands were extended to the social and political fields.

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One of the Yellow Vests' demands is to set the record straight: this seems necessary for the proper functioning of democracy. The media and institutions also recognize this claim, which is why they are mobilizing to define what constitutes misinformation and produce fact-checking.

# **1. Fact-checking operations are based on assumptions that an epistemological and philosophical examination reveals**

- a) When fact-checking tackles misinformation, it does so in a variety of ways. Most often, it is a thorough investigation, not new to journalism. For the philosopher Manuel Cervera-Marzal, it is even an "elementary task of every journalist since the invention of the profession" (Cervera-Marzal 2019, p.17), which will examine suspicious information: it questions sources, compares statements and facts, and makes a selection based on evidence. For example, the fact-checker will prove that a video has been edited in a way that distorts its meaning. But the media are not the only ones to do fact-checking, Yellow Vests also do it, politicians also.
- b) This therefore raises epistemological questions that are neither asked nor resolved because the definition of misinformation is based on a conception of truth on which Fact-checking will also be based. The facts or statements verified can be reduced to a simple bivalence: true or false, "Black-and-white facts" according to Butler & Uscinski (Uscinski et Butler 2013) ; while other fact-checking uses rating metrics (Amazeen 2015) which means that they consider that truth can be measured with degrees of accuracy. Finally, some facts and statements, such as those relating to a future prediction, are irremediably beyond the reach of fact-checking because they are unverifiable (Uscinski 2015): they cannot be considered as misinformation. Disinformation/disinformation is doubly constructed: by designers who develop it and by fact-checkers who designate it as disinformation.
- c) A conceptual analysis as practiced in philosophy also reveals the close links between the definition of disinformation, the fact-checking that feeds it and the conception of truth on which disinformation and fact-checking are based. More specifically, by sorting information on the

basis of whether it is false or true, fact-checking acts as a tool that feeds the definition of disinformation/misinformation, as it classifies a certain amount of information under this label in this category. A conceptual analysis of misinformation covers 2 levels:

- On the one hand, we can state the essential attributes that characterize misinformation (i.e., give the *intent of the concept*). On this level, the Yellow Vests, the media, and institutions agree: misinformation is false information created in a desire to harm or manipulate, as recognized by social scientists (Tandoc, Lim, et Ling 2018; Wardle et Derakhshan 2017) or by EU Institutions (European Commission et Directorate-General for Communications Networks 2018).
- and on the other hand, we can state to determine the set of things to which this definition or intent applies. In this case, we're talking about information circulating in a socio-digital context and therefore of putting order into the news that circulates. It is through the fact-checking operation that those that are misinformation, i.e., false information as opposed to true information, are delimited. However, this plan of the definition is changing, fueled by the results of fact checking operations.

As we can see from the facts, this "sorting", this division between information/disinformation is the subject of controversy between the Yellow Vests, the media and institutions. For example, in the United States of America, the estimate of the number of people present at the inauguration of President Donald Trump has been described as an "alternative fact" by the government and as a "demonstrable error" for the media. Another example, in France, in December 2018: the television news of a national channel broadcasted a retouched photograph from Agence France Presse. On the brandished sign; it is simply written "Macron", while the original sign showed "Macron dégage" (which means "Macron out of the way"). A controversy broke out; the editorial staff apologized, it was a "human error", but social networks accused the media of censorship. As a final example, on May 2019, demonstrators tried to enter the hospital of La Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris. The Minister of the Interior described this as an "attack" but was contradicted by the videos and the first statements of the witnesses. This is a "fake news" for some media such as Russia Today France or Marianne, a "simple mistake" accompanied by a "media hype" for the executive. It can be seen that the operation of verifying the accuracy of information is part of a broader context, that of a political balance of power specific to the Yellow Vests crisis: see video.

## **2. So fact-checking poses an info-communication difficulty**

- all questionable news is not considered as disinformation from the point of view of where you stand. Thus, disinformation is part of the fact-checking operations that necessarily guide and delimit it. Fact-checking can indeed examine the relationship between a fact or statement and the truth, but it cannot say anything about malice (those accused of disinformation defend themselves with speeches).

- To be understood, disinformation or disinformation and fact-checking must be considered as speeches. This means as a form of activity that is part of a communication system, that relates to norms, to social groups... This leads to the following questions being asked on the part of the production authority: what "situation-problem" do fact checking practices reflect for given actors? What legitimacy is being sought? What skills are they claiming? And other questions from the receiving authority: what is the influence of these speeches on the target audiences? Does disinformation actually disorientate citizens?

**3. The question of the truth that fact-checking and the definition of disinformation involve is not only an epistemological issue: it is also a major political issue.**

Michel Foucault stressed the link between truth and power through the notion of a regime of truth that truth is produced by various social-discursive and technical procedures (Foucault [1975] 2008). Fact-checking practices can be usefully questioned from this perspective. These speeches require adherence to the authority from which it proceeds. However, the media and information crisis is also a crisis of authority (of the elites) and the translation of events. It is a crisis of meaning, a conflict of meanings in our democratic societies. Can fact checking therefore be held above the melee as a discourse of truth?

To claim the restoration of the facts as all the stakeholders in this crisis seem to claim is based on a premise: it expresses the belief that politics would have close links with the truth. The latter should even be one of the foundations of it. While the public debate is based on acknowledged facts, in the final analysis, politics and truth are based on divergent rationales, as political philosophy shows (Revault d'Allonnes 2018), as the philosopher Hanna Arendt has written (Arendt [1961] 1989).

In some respects, some phenomena of misinformation reveal a challenge to the authority established in our democracies in response to the temptation to associate power with knowledge with "epistemocratic" or "epistocratic" temptation. This consists in indexing the "truth" of politics to the power of those who "know". This is an attempt to avoid the endless debates that accompany democratic politics. This attempt is not new. Saint-Simon wanted to entrust power to "enlightened" individuals (scientists, industrialists), which favours a technicalization of political choices. Before him, Plato had imagined entrusting political power to the scientists alone in *The Republic* (Platon 2004). Now, according to the philosopher Revault d'Allonnes: "We can think of the consistency and autonomy of human affairs insofar as they move in a field that is not that of science and the necessary: they are part of contingency, of what is not regulated by necessity" (Revault d'Allonnes 2018). The temptation to place the conduct of democratic debate under the exclusive sign of truth is abusive: bankruptcy is a risk when deliberating and judging on common affairs ("epistemic risk", Revault d'Allonnes 2018, p. 45), but this risk is acceptable insofar as it is considered to be part of a kind of "political education curriculum". Thus, part of the reflection is not for experts but for citizens through the practice of collective deliberation and judgment. It is not necessarily a question of arriving at a truth but at a doxa, which is not either a simple opinion that Plato

could decry, but a doxa in the sense that Aristotle understands it: "the doxa represents a form of consensual space, a common ground prior to any argumentation" (*id.*, p. 48), because as far as human affairs are concerned, "we never deliberate on what is necessary and invariable, but always on the contingent that may be other than it is" (*id.*, p. 48). It is therefore not a question of claiming to reach truth, but simply the probable, the plausible. This can also be understood in a different way by adopting a pragmatic conception of truth: truth is what works. However, since the various Fact-checking practices do not succeed in remedying the yellow vest crisis, but on the contrary polarize the positions of the opponents, this may be a sign that the fact-checking has not succeeded in restoring the facts and "establishing a truth" as it had intended.

## Conclusion

Despite its good intentions, does fact-checking not manifest an epistemic temptation if the fact-checking results and methods are not appropriate by the public (i.e. does not lead to its being swept away). It may be perceived as contributing to the imposition of informational order, which in turn revives a public advocacy response.

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