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Review of The Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation

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The Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation by Stefania M. Maci, Massimiliano Demata, Mark McGlashan, and Philip Seargeant, Routledge, 2024, 454pp, $246.50 (Hardback) $50.14 (eBook). ISBN 978-1-03-212425-4

In today's information age, where the boundaries between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred, understanding the nature of information has become crucial to contemporary discourse. The advent of digital platforms has transformed the dissemination of information, often amplifying disinformation that spreads swiftly and widely. This phenomenon has profound implications for public and political discourse, as disinformation permeates political agendas, social debates, and scientific contexts. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe, the spread of misinformation and disinformation—what they term "information disorder"—poses serious risks to the integrity of public knowledge and trust. Thus, understanding the dynamics behind this phenomenon is not merely an intellectual practice but a necessary endeavor to safeguard the collective reliability of information.

The Routledge Handbook of Discourse and Disinformation, edited by Stefania M. Maci, Massimiliano Demata, Mark McGlashan, and Philip Seargeant, provides a thorough blend of chapters revolving around the discourses of disinformation, misinformation, post-truth, alternative facts, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and fake news. The handbook investigates how disinformation is constructed through an array of discursive strategies, analyzing its proliferation across focal domains such as politics, society, and healthcare. By closely examining the rhetorical and persuasive techniques that underpin disinformation, it addresses the complexities of distinguishing between false and legitimate news. Furthermore, the volume critically engages with the influence of digital platforms, media bias, and the broader socio-political consequences of disinformation, offering a subtle understanding of how these forces shape public discourse and societal perceptions. Notably, it highlights the critical issue of the scarcity of comprehensive datasets, which hinders the development of more effective analytical tools for detecting and mitigating disinformation.

In this regard, the handbook can appeal to readers with a solid foundation in discourse analysis and familiarity with its key theoretical constructs. A deep understanding of

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discourse-analytical approaches is crucial to fully appreciate the interpretations of data presented throughout the volume. As some sections assume a degree of prior knowledge that might make them less accessible to a broader audience, the book is best suited for scholars in discourse and new media studies, advanced doctoral students specializing in digital discourse, and media professionals already engaged with the intricate dynamics of language, power, and ideology in the context of disinformation.

To guide readers through its extensive exploration, the handbook is divided into two main parts. The first section, *Genres and Methodologies*, introduces a range of discursive forms—newspaper headlines, memes, and social media posts—and explores methodologies including critical discourse analysis (CDA), corpus analysis and multimodal analysis for recontextualizing disinformation. Sala's chapter on media headlines emphasizes how the brevity and sensationalism of headlines can distort information. These headlines are designed to capture attention quickly, leading to skewed portrayals of events. Sabbah's contribution also applies CDA to examine how disinformation exploits polarization, legitimation, and blame-shifting strategies, manipulating public opinion. Additionally, whereas Kalsnes introduces "digital source criticism," emphasizing the importance of scrutinizing the origins and credibility of online news sources to combat misinformation, Catenaccio explores the dangers of "semi-fake" scientific reporting, where selective presentation of data misleads the public on critical health and environmental issues such as vaccine safety, climate change, and genetically modified organisms. Asr, Mokhtari, and Taboada explore the challenges of automated misinformation detection systems, which rely on machine learning and require more high-quality datasets for accurate results. Jaworska emphasizes that Twitter's fragmented, emotionally charged language accelerates disinformation, particularly content that evokes fear or outrage. Lastly, Iaia's study on memes in this section highlights their dual role in spreading and debunking false narratives. While memes simplify complex issues and fuel disinformation, they also serve as tools for media literacy, using humor and irony to promote critical thinking, showing their complex role in digital communication.

The second part, *Case Studies*, presents in-depth analyses of disinformation in three domains: politics, society, and healthcare. The authors appear to advocate for the practical application of the theoretical frameworks presented in the first part. Taylor explores disinformation in immigration discourses, highlighting how xenophobic narratives are constructed to manipulate public opinion by using fearmongering, dehumanization, and exaggerated claims. In addition to Abbiati and Maci's chapter on the use of misleading statistics and selective facts during the Brexit campaign, Demata's chapter examines political delegitimization during the 2016 US presidential election, illustrating how conspiracy theories were used to undermine trust in democratic institutions.

The *Society* subsection addresses topics such as gender-based violence and climate change, with various authors revealing how disinformation shapes public understanding and social polarization. Taylor highlights how false narratives in cases of violence against women shift blame onto victims, reinforcing stereotypes and minimizing perpetrators' responsibility. Iaia discusses the online harassment of female politicians, showing how disinformation undermines their credibility and authority. Kibisova and Põldvere analyze anti-LGBTIQ + rhetoric, demonstrating how disinformation promotes divisive ideologies and deepens social prejudice. The section also addresses climate change denialism, showing how pseudoscientific rhetoric spreads confusion and delays environmental action.

The *Medical Discourses* subsection examines health-related misinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on public health. Inwood and Zappavigna discuss the "infodemic," highlighting how disinformation on social media—such as conspiracy

theories and false treatments—eroded trust in healthcare and fueled vaccine hesitancy. Asr focuses on the spread of fake health news through private platforms like WhatsApp, emphasizing the challenges of controlling misinformation in encrypted, closed networks. These chapters highlight the serious consequences of health-related disinformation and the difficulties of addressing it in both public and private digital spaces.

This handbook is a well-researched and intellectually rigorous examination of disinformation, distinguished by its use of sophisticated methodologies such as CDA, corpus analysis, and multimodal analysis. These analytical approaches provide valuable, in-depth insights into the discursive mechanisms that fuel the spread of disinformation. The book's ability to traverse multiple disciplines—media studies, discourse analysis, and applied linguistics—enhances its relevance and breadth, making it an indispensable resource for scholars across these fields. The organization into two clear sections demonstrates a logical structure, offering readers a systematic exploration of both theoretical and applied dimensions of disinformation. Particularly noteworthy chapters include Michele Sala's detailed analysis of US media headlines and Farah Sabbah's application of CDA, both of which offer nuanced reflections on how bias and disinformation permeate media discourse. Similarly, Paola Catenaccio's work on semi-fake scientific news masterfully exposes the complexities of scientific misinformation, providing readers with critical tools to navigate this growing issue.

While the handbook excels in its theoretical exploration, its highly specialized content may alienate readers unfamiliar with advanced methodologies like CDA and corpus analysis. These sections, although academically rigorous, may prove less accessible to those outside of academia or without a technical background, potentially limiting the book's appeal to a broader audience. Moreover, while the two-part structure is largely effective, the transitions between certain case studies feel disjointed. A more cohesive link between the political, social, and medical disinformation chapters would enhance the overall flow, enabling readers to better grasp how disinformation strategies adapt and intersect across different domains. Additionally, when compared to other works in the field—such as *Disinformation and Digital Media as a Challenge for Democracy* (2020) by Terzis et al.—this handbook, while rich in theoretical depth, offers fewer practical strategies for combatting disinformation. Terzis et al., by contrast, provide actionable frameworks for policymakers, journalists, and civil society organizations, making their work more directly applicable in real-world contexts.

To broaden its appeal, the handbook could benefit from additional interpretive guidance for readers less familiar with complex methodologies such as CDA and multimodal analysis. More accessible explanations, combined with concrete examples from the case studies, would make these sections more approachable. Additionally, expanding the book's scope to include more cross-cultural comparisons or examining long-term disinformation strategies in non-Western contexts would offer a more global perspective, further enriching its scholarly contribution. The book could also improve its cohesion by creating stronger connections between the various domains of disinformation it explores—linking the strategies used in political, social, and health-related disinformation would provide a more integrated understanding of how disinformation operates across sectors. Finally, including more practical tools for addressing disinformation, particularly for non-academic audiences, would increase its applicability in fields such as media, public policy, and education.

Despite these areas for improvement, the handbook is an outstanding contribution to the study of disinformation, excelling in both theoretical depth and methodological rigor. It offers a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach that will undoubtedly serve as a key resource for future research. The detailed analyses presented in chapters equip readers with critical insights into the nuanced dynamics of disinformation, encouraging a deeper understanding of this

urgent issue. The inclusion of semiotic and linguistic analysis further enriches the discussion, demonstrating the handbook's capacity to engage with disinformation from multiple angles.

In conclusion, this handbook stands as a vital resource for scholars and professionals seeking to understand the complexities of disinformation in the digital age. While its specialized content may present challenges to some readers, its profound insights into the mechanisms of disinformation, combined with its rigorous methodological framework, make it a seminal work in the field. By addressing the gaps in accessibility and practical application, the handbook could further elevate its status, serving not only as a key academic text but also as a practical guide for those at the frontlines of combating disinformation. Ultimately, this volume offers a powerful and indispensable tool for navigating and addressing the prevalent effect of disinformation because disinformation is more than simply a misrepresentation of the facts; it is a deliberate attack on critical thinking and public confidence that needs both thorough investigation and proactive steps to counteract its pervasive influence.

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