The Role of Discursive Genres in the Spread of Fake News: Visual Rhetoric, Cognitive Biases, and Cross-Platform Dynamics

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DOI: 10.63467/alls14.art4

Abstract

This article investigates how discursive genres shape the propagation of fake news across social media platforms, focusing on persuasive and manipulative discourse mechanisms. By examining the role of polyphonic discourse, intertextuality, cognitive biases, and visual rhetoric (including memes and deep fakes), the paper explores how genre conventions adapt to different platforms, amplifying the reach and believability of misinformation. Case studies, including the "Plandemic" meme series and the deepfake of Mark Zuckerberg, highlight the powerful influence of emotionally charged and visually persuasive content. The analysis also addresses the cross-platform dissemination of narratives, illustrating how different genres contribute to creating a networked ecosystem of misinformation. By combining insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), intertextuality theory, and media studies, the article sheds light on the sophisticated tactics used to manipulate audiences and spread misinformation.

Keywords: Discursive Genres, Fake News, Polyphony, Persuasion, Digital Media Amplification.

1. Introduction

Contextualizing Fake News: The role of misinformation in contemporary society, particularly the rapid spread of fake news through digital platforms.

The Rise of Discursive Genres in Digital Media: An introduction to discursive genres and their ability to adapt to various online platforms (e.g., memes, videos, fake news articles, manipulated images).

Research Questions: How do different discursive genres influence the propagation of fake news? What role do visual rhetoric and cognitive biases play in this dissemination?

Discussing the problem of fake news spread on social media and the polyphonic discourse across different platforms is highly relevant in the context of education. Some of the main reasons refer to the fact that education plays a crucial role in developing students' ability to critically evaluate the information they consume, education systems having a responsibility to prepare students for active citizenship, focusing on developing communication skills that can enable them to engage with diverse viewpoints, encouraging constructive dialogue rather than polarization. We can't ignore the potential danger of fake news significantly altering educational patterns. The erosion of critical thinking skills might lead to the situation when our students struggle to differentiate between credible information and misinformation. Without proper training in critical thinking and media literacy, they may accept information at face value, leading to the erosion of their ability to critically evaluate sources, analyze arguments and form well-reasoned conclusions. The impact on knowledge foundations is obvious in this respect. Fake news can distort students' understanding of core subjects particularly history, science or politics. In this way they can develop a flawed understanding of the world. Another possible risk is the development of polarized thinking, with fake news often exploiting the emotional triggers, playing into biases, fears or ideologies. Social media algorithms can create echo chambers where students are exposed only to information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. Instead of becoming open-minded, empathetic thinkers, they may develop rigid, extreme viewpoints. All of these potential dangers have the capacity to undermine the trust in institutions, leading to a generation that is cynical about learning, scientific reasoning and expertise. This could cause a shift toward anti-intellectualism, where students prioritize emotional narratives or unverified sources over reason and evidence. Without the proper tools to

filter and evaluate information they may be easily misled by false narratives, becoming less competent professionals and vulnerable citizens.

The key to counteracting this threat is integrating media literacy and critical thinking into the curricula, at all possible levels of education. The present article tries to contribute to our understanding of the evolving landscape of digital communication and the critical need for media literacy and responsible digital citizenship in the digital age. Furthermore, the article addresses the complex and dynamic nature of online texts, emphasizing their adaptability and the interplay of voices. By drawing parallels with traditional media we can further investigates how polyphony in online discourse shapes the construction of reality and public perception. We are facing a paradigm shift, when internet linguistics has incorporated sociolinguistics and computational aspects and we must address this challenge without delay.

Key Concepts:

- Discursive Genres – The specific forms of discourse, such as news articles, memes, and tweets, that structure the presentation of information and shape audience perception.
- Fake News – Misinformation deliberately crafted to deceive, often spread through both traditional and social media platforms.
- Polyphony – Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of multiple voices or perspectives in discourse, highlighting how fake news can embed diverse, often conflicting, viewpoints to manipulate understanding.
- Persuasion – The rhetorical strategies, including implicit and explicit argumentation, used in fake news to shape public opinion and influence decision-making.
- Digital Media Amplification – The role of social media platforms, algorithms, and the digital landscape in accelerating the dissemination and visibility of fake news across different genres.

Fake News can have a significant impact on all age categories, but especially on young people due to their reliance on social media and digital sources for news and information. Lewandowsky (et al., 2017) refers to an epistemic crisis- the "discourse does not try to establish a coherent model of reality, it aims at eroding trust in facts and reality". New generations come with a declining attention span and tendency to switch back and forth between different apps. It is said that Millennials seem to prefer to consume content, while GenZ to create content (over

60% of them using Tiktok). Much more, we are facing deepfake (created through different software and artificial intelligence). We already have a new verb - "to deepfake". From "truth" we, as a global community, have migrated to "post –truth"(which was word of the year 2016, according to Oxford Dictionary, which reflects what Ralph Keyes (2004) says – that "as intelligent beings we invented rational reasons for manipulating the truth".

Occurences of the word "fake" indicated by teenagers, in a survey conducted by me on 25 teenagers, aged 13-14, revealed the following cases: fake news; fake accounts (trolling in games); fake reviews; fake followers/likes; fake ID; fake apps; fake profiles, through "catfishing" – creating a fictional online persona). These multiple occurrences at such a young age suggest that young generations are exposed to the phenomenon more than we might think.

The language of chat, blogs, sites or forums, the one present on social media platforms, represents a new form of communication, neither spoken, nor written, a centaur like creature, maybe as potent as its original mythological source. Advantages come bundled with disadvantages, the openness of communication with a limitless number of people is accompanied by bad orthography or punctuation, extreme use of abbreviations, ambiguity, stylistic mistakes imitated and transmitted to others, due to limited linguistic competence or ignorance, but also the proliferation of disinformation and fake news.

2. Literature Review

The spread of fake news across digital platforms is not a random or isolated phenomenon but is deeply rooted in complex discourse practices and cognitive processes. The literature review consulted revealed that different genres contribute to fake news in unique ways. News articles often use sensationalist headlines and misleading data, while social media posts leverage hashtags and viral trends to gain traction. Memes, with their visual appeal and brevity, can distill complex misinformation into easily digestible content. Secondly, among the several key persuasive strategies we can include emotional manipulation, false equivalence, and appeals to authority. These mechanisms enhance the persuasive power of fake news by engaging readers' emotions and biases. The presence of multiple voices in fake news can enhance its perceived credibility. By presenting information from various sources or viewpoints, fake news can create

an illusion of balance and objectivity, making it more persuasive. Furthermore, the interplay between traditional and social media amplifies the spread of fake news. Traditional media often provides initial coverage that is later disseminated and distorted by social media platforms, creating a feedback loop that reinforces misinformation.

Intertextuality and Polyphonic Discourse - intertextuality, a concept developed by Julia Kristeva (1980) and expanded by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) through his theory of polyphonic discourse, refers to the ways in which texts reference, quote, or build upon other texts to create meaning. In the digital age, intertextuality is central to the circulation of fake news, as misinformation often borrows credibility from legitimate sources or existing narratives to gain traction.

The Concept of Fake News: fake news can be seen as false or bad news, "fabricated" news, as opposed to true/good news. False reports are disguised as real. This is not a modern discovery, as the literature mentions the "yellow journalism" or "freak journalism" of the past. "Truth", "accuracy" and "objectivity" are cornerstones of journalism ethics. People presume that those who present a message have the purpose to inform (Griece, Schwarz, 2014 - the logic of communication). They need information but also meaning associated to it. Dis-information seems to have a greater power than information because it is more concentrated on its target audience, generating action, especially when based on social identities. (Murphy, F., Patnoe-Woodley, 2011). Claire Wardle, when speaking about fake news, distinguishes between: mis-information, dis-information, mal-information. Noam Chomsky argues that mainstream media is complicit in spreading fake news by promoting a narrow range of viewpoints, ignoring important facts.

The article "Digital false information at scale in the European Union" (2022) shows the distribution of research topics: Didactic 1%, Neuroscience & Psychology 4%, Health Care studies 9%, Communication and Media 12%, Social Science 15%, Computer science and Information studies 61%, only 3 out of 93 papers being from Romania.

Persuasion, argumentation and demonstration are all related to the process of conveying information, convincing others, establishing a point of view. Demonstration has no emotional and subjective dimension. In argumentation, subjectivity is reduced to a minimum. But in the case of persuasion, we have both logic and emotional appeal – resulting in an ambiguous term.

The persuasive power of discourse (political, media, advertising) is as important nowadays, as it always was. The "universal audience" of Perelman, in "The New Rhetoric" becomes a "particular audience" nowadays. Gross (Gross & Dearin, 2003) mentions that "speeches for the universal audience focus on the real (fact, truth, presumption), while those for a particular audience on the preferable (values)". When speaking about manipulation, Van Dijk (2006:360) says "manipulation…is a communicative and interactional practice…a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will and best interest… such practice violates social norms. Manipulation not only involves power, but specifically abuse of power, … it is a form of illegitimate influence by means of discourse". Manipulation techniques include: the rumor, the misinformation, the intoxication, the propaganda.

Fake news typically aims to both persuade and manipulate its audience, spreading false or misleading information while presenting it as factual news. It seeks to influence people's beliefs, opinions, to shape public perception, by intentionally distorting facts, in order to generate web traffic, creating confusion, or simply for entertainment. Manipulation comes into play as fake news often employs various techniques to exploit people's emotions, biases and cognitive vulnerabilities. It can even speculate on the cognitive dissonance (L.Festinger), individuals experiencing discomfort when they hold inconsistent or conflicting belief.

On social media platforms, persuasion and/or manipulation can be achieved through various mechanisms: societal proof (influencers/celebrities endorsing products), reciprocity (in relationship with followers), scarcity, authority and consistency, filter bubbles. The linguistic methods mostly used: rhetorical questions, repetitions, metaphors, inclusive language, power words, use of urgency words, framing, use of humor, call for action ("Share this!"). ("An inclusive, real-world investigation of persuasion in language and verbal behavior", by Vivian P. Ta, Ryan L. Boyd et al. (2021). Bogdan Oprea, in his book from 2022 offers a synthesis of the topic of fake news. In the article "Social clicks: what and who gets read on Twitter" (Gabielkov et al., 2016) documents a paradigm shift in accessing information, based on a study of clicks: from "pull" to "push" since the proliferation of social networks. All four Paul Grice's maxims of conversation: quality, quantity, relation, manner are distorted on social media platforms.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a robust framework for examining how language and discourse reproduce power relations, ideologies, and social practices. Developed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough (1995) and Teun van Dijk (1998), CDA is particularly useful in analyzing fake news because it focuses on how language is used to legitimize certain viewpoints while marginalizing others. CDA posits that discourse is not neutral but is shaped by socio-political structures, and it, in turn, shapes social realities. Through a CDA lens, fake news can be analyzed as a form of discursive manipulation, where language and genre are used not merely to inform but to influence and shape the beliefs of the audience. By examining how language choices in fake news—such as lexical selection, syntactic structure, and metaphor use—reinforce certain ideologies, CDA provides critical insights into the mechanics of persuasion in digital misinformation.

In the context of visual rhetoric, intertextuality extends beyond textual elements to include visual references. Memes, for instance, often draw on culturally significant images (e.g., historical photographs or pop culture symbols) to invoke specific emotions or associations. The "Plandemic" meme series, for example, references visual symbols associated with healthcare and government authority, creating a juxtaposition between these symbols and conspiracy theories about global control. This visual intertextuality strengthens the meme's message by drawing on familiar imagery that resonates with users.

Polyphony in digital media also manifests through the interplay of multiple genres—such as memes, videos, and articles—that reinforce one another across platforms. By strategically incorporating different genres, fake news creates an ecosystem of misinformation, where various forms of content circulate simultaneously, giving the impression of widespread credibility.

In the digital age, visual content plays a crucial role in the dissemination of fake news. Visual rhetoric, which focuses on how images communicate meaning and influence perception, is particularly important when analyzing genres such as memes and deepfakes. Semiotics provides a theoretical basis for understanding how visual elements function within these genres to create persuasive and often deceptive messages. Semiotically, images function through a system of signs, where visual elements (icons, symbols, colors) carry specific meanings. In the context of

fake news, semiotic analysis reveals how certain symbols are manipulated to evoke trust or fear. For instance, a deepfake of a political leader giving a controversial speech can manipulate the audience's perception by using the leader's recognizable face (icon) and familiar body language (symbol) to falsely attribute harmful intentions. The analysis of such visual signs and their role in deception is essential for understanding how visual rhetoric contributes to the spread of misinformation.

Cognitive Biases - systematic patterns of deviation from rationality, play a key role in the spread and acceptance of fake news. Psychological research has demonstrated that people are more likely to believe and share misinformation that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs or emotions, even when presented with factual corrections (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). Understanding these biases is crucial for analyzing how fake news is both created and consumed.

Two cognitive biases are particularly relevant to fake news: **confirmation bias** and the **illusory truth effect**. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency of individuals to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. In the context of fake news, this means that users are more likely to engage with and share content that reinforces their ideological stance, regardless of its accuracy. Social media platforms, through algorithms that prioritize content based on user preferences, further exacerbate this bias by creating echo chambers in which users are exposed primarily to information that confirms their views.

The illusory truth effect occurs when repeated exposure to false information increases its perceived truthfulness. This bias is particularly dangerous in the age of viral content, where fake news spreads rapidly across platforms. Even when users are initially skeptical of a piece of misinformation, repeated exposure—through memes, articles, or videos—can lead them to accept it as true. For example, during the spread of misinformation about COVID-19, repeated claims about the virus being a hoax circulated across multiple platforms, eventually gaining credibility among certain audiences despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

The combination of these **cognitive biases** with **the discursive power of visual rhetoric** and **intertextuality** creates a potent mechanism for the spread of fake news. By exploiting the emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities of users, fake news creators can ensure that their content resonates and spreads, even in the face of contradictory information.

Cross-Platform Dynamics and the Ecosystem of Misinformation

The digital media landscape is characterized by its fragmented and highly networked nature, where different platforms serve as conduits for the circulation of content. The cross-platform dynamics of fake news refer to how discursive genres adapt to the specific affordances of each platform—whether it's the brevity of tweets, the virality of YouTube videos, or the meme culture of Instagram—and how this adaptation facilitates the spread of misinformation across different audience demographics. Each platform imposes its own constraints and possibilities for the dissemination of fake news. For instance, Twitter's character limit forces users to distill complex misinformation into short, often sensationalist snippets, while YouTube allows for longer, more elaborate narratives to be constructed through video. Facebook, with its focus on community and networked sharing, encourages the circulation of fake news within ideological bubbles, further reinforcing confirmation bias. The cross-platform nature of fake news dissemination means that content created in one genre (e.g., a meme) can be transformed and repurposed for another (e.g., a video), increasing its reach and adaptability. These cross-platform dynamics create an interconnected ecosystem of misinformation, where content is constantly recycled, recontextualized, and redistributed.

3. Discursive Genres and Fake News

The discursive genres that shape communication on social media platforms have significantly evolved, facilitating the creation and spread of fake news. As dynamic constructs, these genres adapt across platforms, harnessing both textual and visual elements to manipulate meaning and influence audience perception. This section explores three prominent discursive genres—memes, deepfakes, and fake news articles—demonstrating how each genre's affordances contribute to the proliferation of misinformation.

3.1 Memes as a Discursive Genre

Memes have emerged as a powerful discursive genre, defined by their brevity, visual appeal, and ability to encapsulate complex ideas within a single image or short video. The strength of memes lies in their intertextuality and polyphony, drawing on shared cultural knowledge to

establish meaning while allowing for diverse interpretations depending on the audience. These characteristics make memes particularly potent vehicles for fake news.

A key factor in the spread of memes is their emotional appeal. Research has shown that emotionally charged content—whether humorous, shocking, or fear-inducing—tends to be shared more widely than neutral information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Memes capitalize on this by condensing emotionally charged messages into digestible, easily shareable forms. The use of humor, irony, or exaggerated visuals enables memes to bypass critical scrutiny, encouraging users to engage with content without questioning its veracity.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Plandemic" meme series gained widespread traction by incorporating humor, fear, and conspiracy-laden visuals to suggest that the pandemic was orchestrated by global elites. The images often featured familiar visual tropes, such as shadowy figures or distorted medical symbols, evoking distrust of authority. By framing the content within the familiar and popular genre of memes, these visuals allowed the misinformation to cross from fringe platforms into mainstream discourse on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The ability of memes to thrive in a highly networked, cross-platform environment demonstrates their role as a genre that perpetuates fake news, with intertextuality enabling their messages to resonate with diverse audiences.

3.2 Deepfakes as a Visual Genre

Deepfakes represent a newer, highly sophisticated discursive genre that manipulates visual and auditory elements to create hyper-realistic fake videos. Unlike traditional forms of visual manipulation, which rely on editing still images, deepfakes generate entirely new content using machine learning algorithms. As such, they represent a unique form of visual rhetoric, where deception is hidden within the hyper-realism of the footage itself. The power of deepfakes as a discursive genre lies in their ability to evoke strong emotional responses, particularly when they feature well-known public figures. This emotional manipulation, coupled with the seeming authenticity of the footage, makes deepfakes particularly effective in undermining trust in media and public institutions.

A prominent example of this is the Mark Zuckerberg deepfake, which surfaced in 2019. In the video, Zuckerberg appears to boast about controlling the world's data, effectively presenting a

dystopian version of himself that plays on public fears of corporate overreach. The deepfake mimicked Zuckerberg's voice and mannerisms so convincingly that, despite being revealed as fake, it sparked widespread debate about data privacy and the manipulation of public opinion. The video's virality across multiple platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, illustrated how deepfakes, as a genre, tap into users' cognitive biases -specifically the illusory truth effect, where repeated exposure to fake information increases its believability.

Furthermore, deepfakes, like memes, exploit intertextuality. The Zuckerberg deepfake, for instance, alludes to broader concerns about tech monopolies and surveillance capitalism, building on real-world events like the Cambridge Analytica scandal. This layering of intertextual references amplifies the fake news content, as audiences already primed to distrust tech companies are more likely to accept the manipulated footage as plausible.

3.3 Fake News Articles and Headlines

Another crucial discursive genre in the dissemination of misinformation is the fake news article. These texts, often indistinguishable from legitimate news at first glance, use the conventions of traditional journalism—headlines, datelines, citations—to construct an appearance of credibility. However, the manipulation often occurs within the structure of the article itself, where selective reporting, false citations, or fabricated quotes distort the narrative to suit ideological purposes.

The genre of fake news articles is particularly effective due to its reliance on sensationalism, a feature that has long been used in tabloid journalism to capture reader attention. Sensationalist headlines, in particular, are a key element in shaping audience perceptions before they even engage with the content of the article. Studies have demonstrated that readers often internalize the message of a headline even when the body of the article contradicts it (Ecker, Lewandowsky, & Tang, 2014). In the context of fake news, this creates an environment in which the headline alone can do the work of spreading misinformation.

One example of this is the circulation of headlines during the 2016 U.S. presidential election that falsely claimed Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump. Despite being quickly debunked, the headline went viral on Facebook, accumulating millions of shares. The simple, declarative structure of the headline played on readers' cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias, as it aligned with existing narratives about religious figures' influence on political decisions. The

intertextuality of this genre is evident in how it mimics the conventions of legitimate news outlets, making it difficult for casual readers to discern truth from fabrication.

The discourse genres on social media that mostly favor the spreading of fake news include: social media posts- text-based status updates, links to articles or websites, multimedia content (images, videos); memes and visual content- manipulated images or videos, highly shareable, exploiting humor, satire, or emotional appeal; user comments and replies – which can become echo chambers.

By examining the interplay between language, technology and social dynamics, the affordances of social platforms, we can better understand the phenomenon of fake news and react to it. From Bahtin to Ducrot (as examined by Ligia S. Florea, Polifonia în structurile limbii, 2022), we are aware of the fact that the speaker is not always the source of the message, being sometimes just a carrier of others' points of view. In order to interpret the meaning of a certain message, one needs to identify the initial source/voice. The problem is even more complicated in the case of social media discourse, which is not fixed, but dynamic, characterized brevity, consisting of text accompanied by emojis or other visuals, constantly evolving, encompassing a diverse array of voices, extending beyond the confines of any single platform.

The voices that are "heard" belong both to humans and nonhumans (bots, trolls, cyborgs), the images and videos may be manipulated by A.I and what we "see" is not the truth. In a "concert" of voices all present in the social media discourse we can but try to: identify the main voice, determine the perspective, the author's position or the source of misinformation. We should also try to identify the opposing voices, by looking for contrasting voices that challenge or counter the main voice. We can also proceed at analyzing the argumentation strategies. According to Ducrot's theory we establish the role of different types of argumentation operators: **concessions**- instances where the main voice acknowledges counterarguments or opposing points- indicating biased reasoning; **contradictions** – between different parts of the text, refutations – opposing voices countering the claims made by the main voice.

Inspired by the article "Leçons de << p'tits profs>> sur la Toile" (Liana Pop), I identified the following possible meta-discursive genres, which often emerge as a response to the spread of misinformation, used to critic or debunk fake news:

1. Fact-checking articles/posts- organizations or individuals examine claims made in fake news, providing evidence-based refutations. ("Did NASA Discover a New Earth-like Planet?"; Debunking the 5G Conspiracy Theories").
2. Debunking videos - they may feature a person analyzing claims, using evidence, logic and sometimes humor ("Debunking Health Myths: fact vs. Fiction").
3. Data visualization and Infographics – to present accurrate information in a visually compelling way.
4. Database that collect fake news - eg. Veridica- collects fake news and disinformation narratives from central and eastern Europe. ("Moldova is leaving the CIS at the behest of the West": 23 May 2023- false narrative carried by the Russian media).
5. Subreddits "r/Not TheOnion (Reddit- social media platform and online community where users can participate in discussions) – users can share and discuss news articles or headlines that seem so bizzare or absurd that they could be mistaken for satire, real news that are difficult to believe.
6. Community-driven fact-checking – on some social media platforms encourage users to actively participate. (Pizzagate 2016, Momo Challenge 2018, Covid 19-Misinformation).
7. Satirical memes- use humor, sarcasm, visual elements to mock or expose the absurdity of some fake news.

4. Case Studies: The Power of Discursive Genres in the Spread of Fake News

To demonstrate how discursive genres operate in real-world scenarios, this section analyzes two prominent case studies: the "Plandemic" meme series and the Mark Zuckerberg deepfake. These examples illustrate how visual rhetoric, cognitive biases, and cross-platform dynamics converge to amplify the reach and impact of misinformation.

4.1 The "Plandemic" Meme Series: Misinformation through Memes

The "Plandemic" meme series emerged during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, blending conspiracy theories about government and pharmaceutical control with evocative, fear-mongering imagery. This case study illustrates how the meme genre can simplify complex

narratives into bite-sized, emotionally charged content, making them easily digestible and highly shareable across platforms.

The central claim of the "Plandemic" meme series was that COVID-19 was not a natural pandemic but a manufactured event orchestrated by global elites to control populations and profit from the sale of vaccines. Memes in this series used a variety of visual and rhetorical strategies to evoke distrust in health authorities, including images of government leaders with exaggerated facial expressions, references to pharmaceutical symbols, and text overlaid with dramatic, conspiratorial language. The use of humor, irony, and intertextual references to popular dystopian films (e.g., *The Matrix*) contributed to the memes' viral spread, drawing on cultural knowledge to bolster their message.

The genre of memes is particularly effective in spreading fake news because of its polyphony and intertextuality. In the case of "Plandemic," the memes referenced real events, such as the global vaccine rollout, while weaving in falsehoods about governmental conspiracies. These memes tapped into cognitive biases, especially confirmation bias, where users who were already skeptical of government intervention were more likely to share the content. Memes that invoked imagery of medical professionals juxtaposed with captions like "Don't Trust the System" or "Follow the Money" preyed on pre-existing fears and uncertainties, making them compelling even to those who might not fully believe in the conspiracy.

Moreover, the visual simplicity of the memes—a single image combined with minimal text—allowed them to bypass deeper cognitive scrutiny. The immediate emotional impact, coupled with the ease of sharing on platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, made the "Plandemic" memes a prime example of how discursive genres can operate across platforms to spread misinformation.

4.2 The Mark Zuckerberg Deepfake: Visual Manipulation and Cognitive Bias

The second case study focuses on the deepfake of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, which appeared in 2019. This deepfake presents a striking example of how sophisticated visual rhetoric can be weaponized to manipulate perceptions of public figures and influence discourse around issues like privacy, surveillance, and corporate power.

In the video, a convincingly realistic Zuckerberg appears to deliver a speech about controlling the data of billions of users, boasting about the power it gives him. While entirely fabricated, the deepfake was remarkably persuasive due to its precise replication of Zuckerberg's voice, facial expressions, and body language. Its credibility was further bolstered by its dissemination through multiple platforms, including YouTube and Instagram, where it was viewed by millions before being flagged as fake.

This case illustrates the power of deepfakes as a visual genre capable of manipulating audiences by exploiting cognitive biases, particularly the **illusory truth effect**. Even though the deepfake was quickly debunked, the initial exposure left a lasting impact on viewers, who became more skeptical of Zuckerberg and Facebook's role in managing personal data. The deepfake reinforced pre-existing narratives about corporate overreach and surveillance, tapping into the wider cultural distrust of tech companies exacerbated by real-world scandals such as Cambridge Analytica. The **intertextuality** of the deepfake is evident in its references to these events, using them as a backdrop to enhance the believability of the video.

Furthermore, the **cross-platform dynamics** of this deepfake were critical in its spread. The video was shared across YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and even smaller fringe platforms like 4chan, where it was discussed and analyzed by various communities. Each platform's unique affordances—such as the rapid sharing capabilities of Twitter or the algorithmic amplification on YouTube—allowed the video to reach different audiences, further entrenching the misinformation. This case highlights how deepfakes, as a genre, have a multiplier effect on the dissemination of fake news, thanks to their ability to adapt to various platforms and cognitive biases.

By comparing these two case studies, it becomes evident that while the genres differ—memes versus deepfakes—the underlying discursive strategies remain consistent. Both capitalize on visual rhetoric, cognitive biases, and cross-platform dissemination to create an ecosystem where misinformation thrives. These genres rely on a combination of simplicity, emotional appeal, and intertextuality, which makes them particularly suited for the rapid and wide circulation characteristic of fake news.

5. Conclusions

The Future of Discursive Genres in Fake News Propagation

The analysis of discursive genres in the spread of fake news reveals a complex interaction between visual rhetoric, cognitive biases, and platform-specific dynamics. Memes, deepfakes, and fake news articles each exploit the affordances of their respective genres to craft persuasive, emotionally charged narratives that resonate with users across multiple platforms. Through the use of intertextuality and polyphony, these genres manipulate meaning and create a networked ecosystem in which misinformation circulates with unprecedented speed and reach.

As digital technologies evolve, the sophistication of these genres is likely to increase. Advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning suggest that deepfakes, in particular, will become more realistic and harder to detect, posing significant challenges for media literacy and fact-checking efforts. Memes, with their ability to distill complex messages into shareable content, will likely continue to be powerful vehicles for the spread of misinformation, especially in politically charged or crisis-driven contexts.

Addressing the spread of fake news requires an approach that combines technological solutions with media literacy initiatives. While platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have implemented fact-checking mechanisms and AI-driven content moderation, these measures often lag behind the rapidly evolving genres of fake news. Therefore, greater emphasis must be placed on educating users about the tactics employed by misinformation creators, particularly how visual rhetoric and cognitive biases are manipulated to serve ideological purposes.

Finally, future research should continue to explore how discursive genres adapt to new digital environments, including emerging platforms like TikTok and decentralized social networks. Understanding these dynamics will be crucial in developing more effective strategies to combat misinformation and its far-reaching societal impacts. In conclusion, while the battle against fake news remains ongoing, recognizing the power of discursive genres in shaping public discourse is a critical step toward mitigating the spread of misinformation. By interrogating the rhetorical, cognitive, and technological dimensions of these genres, scholars and policymakers can better understand the mechanics of fake news and develop targeted interventions to protect the integrity of public discourse in the digital age.

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