

Expert Reflection

Beyond Disinformation | Essay Series

By [Heidi Tworek](#), [Melody Devries](#), [Nelanthi Hewa](#), [Noel Brett](#), [Wendy Chun](#) · July 28, 2021

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Beyond Disinformation

In this [essay series](#) from *Items*, the SSRC’s digital forum, researchers explore how a stronger understanding of authenticity and realigning our focus beyond disinformation might lead to more robust interventions in an increasingly fractured and polarized political landscape.

Central to the study of mis- and disinformation are questions of how and under what circumstances—social, cultural, historical, and technical—information is deemed “truthful,” “factual,” or “authentic.” Focusing on these deeper questions recognizes “fake news” as a symptom, not the underlying cause of [information disorder](#). What leads people to believe certain facts or, even knowing the facts to be misrepresented, believe in the institution or individual sharing them?

Born from a [Media & Democracy workshop](#), this essay collection emphasizes that authenticity is always relational: It is determined by someone, about someone. Shifting beyond issues of objective fact, it looks instead at questions of authority, performance, and mechanism: Who decides what is authentic? Who is allowed to be authentic?

Beyond Verification: Algorithmic Authenticity and Polarizing Trust

By Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

In the opening essay for the “Beyond Disinformation” series, Wendy HK Chun asks whether authenticity may provide a more useful lens for investigating contemporary social problems that are often treated uniformly as problems of mis- and disinformation.

Stories, Statistics, and Authenticity in Health Communications

By Heidi Tworek

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, as pundits, politicians, and citizens all pored over data dashboards detailing infection rates and deaths, Heidi Tworek asked: What is the historical rationale for how statistics came to become the authentic mode to represent disease? Bringing historical insight to a contemporary problem of science communication, Tworek explores the power and limit of statistics to drive public health interventions.

Platformed Survivorship; Or, Making Yourself Transparent to Be “Seen”

By Nelanthy Hewa

Drawing on feminist scholarship and [social media](#) studies, Nelanthy Hewa discusses the fraught role authenticity plays in cases of sexual assault, where survivors are expected to perform transparency to massive public audiences in order to be believed.

Processes of Authentication and “Fake” News: On Gaining System Access

By Melody Devries and Noel Brett

Melody Devries and Noel Brett explore the ways in which human readers, like online systems, “authenticate” information they receive, checking it for trustworthiness and perceived truth, and how this interacts with notions of identity, homophily, and otherness.