◆ Afterword

Humanistic Studies and the Challenges of Disinformation

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The present volume focuses on various aspects and contexts of disinformation, from the early modern period in Spain—following the wide dissemination of print technology and an ongoing system of state and Church censorship—to today's globalized media platforms, which often see users as exploitable resources to advance specific political, social, and/or personal interests and agendas. It is also the case that platforms outside the purview of authoritarian states lend themselves to both the spread of misinformation and to projects that seek to expose or counter its malevolent effects. In fact, educational institutions have been fostering practical efforts in this direction for several years: one could mention the Trust Project (an international consortium of media outlets allied in the adoption of rigorous accountability and transparency standards), Stanford University's pedagogically oriented Civic Online Reasoning initiative, and the University at Buffalo's Center for Information Integrity, among others. The urgency of these interventions is even more critical today given the irruption of generative artificial intelligence with ever-morphing capacities to spread disinformation.

These challenges and initiatives are accompanied by a growing body of theory that is effectively engaged throughout the present volume. Essays include reflections on inflationary media and its uses, analyses of different types of texts for illustrative purposes, and several pedagogical proposals, some of which involve classroom training (and, in some cases, a rethinking of it), outreach partnerships with individuals, groups, and institutions, and the creative use of social media to challenge injustices and discrimination. These essays demonstrate the potency of literary and cultural studies (in this case, centered around the Hispanic tradition) as a starting point for a type of intellectual mediation whose effectiveness relies to some extent on historical and textual knowledge. Some of the essays advance specific projects to enhance media and reality literacy and promote reasoned discourse and dialogue. David Castillo's *Un-Deceptions: Cervantine Strategies for the Disinformation Age* (2021), as well as the two books that he has co-authored with William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (2016) and *What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (2022), are often referenced to underscore the importance of self-awareness and discernment, as well as understanding the mechanisms of representation/manipulation in inflationary media contexts. At the same time, scholars point to the productive use of Cervantine irony and humor as a model for cultural analysis that aims at diluting the corrosive effects of disinformation.

In their "Introduction" to the present volume, Castillo and Nelson provide a sober assessment of misinformation, documenting the regressive laws recently passed in Quebec (Canada) and in several Republican-controlled areas of the United States (Governor Ron DeSantis's Florida being its current poster child) that scapegoat minorities and disseminate conspiracy theories to undercut social and cultural programs that are seen as progressive. Such initiatives are hardly exclusive of North American politics, as seen, for example, in the interest of Catalonia's nationalist right in gaining direct control over official migration policies in that region. While not all regressive political initiatives have met with success (witness the results of referenda on reproductive rights in several United States conservative states), the relentless attacks on, and censorship of, curricula in elementary and high school public education in the United States are on the rise, as are right-wing critiques of the arts and humanities in higher learning due to a perceived lack of contribution to the interests of a market-driven society and their own disregard for "the Socratic sense of education's importance for every human being"[1] as a model of teaching that privileges inclusion and dialogue. What is telling in this regard is the acerbic criticism levied against the "teaching of African American history, gender and sexuality studies, and . . . intellectual pursuits that intersect with anything that extreme conservatives consider dangerously anti-American."[2] Other essays (including those by Castillo, Johnson, and Aronson) remind us how new technologies alter the perception of reality and how the question of truth is not an entirely new phenomenon but has been of concern since at least the early modern period. One might add to the discussion the well-known example of Cervantes, who had reflected on the economy of the printing press and its wider implications, singling out the changed relationship between author, reader and text once the latter had entered the circuit of distribution "en los brazos de la estampa." It is also worthwhile to remember that in *Don Quijote* Cervantes defined the ideal consumer of texts as "el que sabe" (one who is knowledgeable and perceptive[3]), in contrast to "el vulgo" (one associated with ignorance, gullibility, and close-mindedness), the former recalling a "lector mío," (Cervantes's discerning reader), while the latter (regardless of social status) evoking mass-oriented consumers lacking in self-awareness and discernment, thus unlikely to capture the nuances and irony of a "text." As amply demonstrated by scholars of Cervantes, it is precisely through the use of irony that he unmasks the social ills of his time, among them the scourge of blood statutes, the inhumanity and injustice of ethnic cleansing, and the patriarchal system's oppression of women's potential for self-realization, topics which continue to resonate today.[4]

In his essay in the present volume, Castillo provides a broad historical perspective on "disinformation ops" in early modern Spain, citing the work of historians such as Mercedes García Arenal, Pablo Fernández Albaladejo, and Ricardo García Cárcel. The first links the *Libros Plúmbeos* (Lead Books) of Granada to "a long chain of fraudulent schemes, falsifications and distortions of historical memory"; the second to an "indigenous" chain of fraudulent historical genealogies that follow in the footsteps of official chronicles. The third finds that the "falsifications established a common historical origin for Spanish Christians and Muslims and presented an interpretation of Christianity very close to Islam, thus avoiding talking about the Trinity, the divine nature of Christ, or the cult of images."[5] Furthermore, Castillo argues that some sixteenth and seventeenth-century mythologies promulgated by official chronicles have fed anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant disinformation campaigns of recent times. His essay concludes with an incisive analysis of Cervantine irony in "El retablo de las maravillas," offering it as a model of how to "train readers and spectators to see through the ideological illusions spread by the mass media of his time and ours." Thus, Castillo advocates for what he and Egginton have dubbed *reality literacy*, that is, an understanding of how "our medialogy frames, edits, constructs reality."[6]

While it is difficult to argue against the value of such understanding, it is also the case that people often see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear, in line with their mindsets and political predispositions, a conclusion supported by research undertaken by social psychologists and cognitive linguists.[7] A basic illustration of this idea is the cultish embrace of a lawless former U.S. President by a segment of MAGA Republicans (including some members of Congress and a core of conspiracy-peddling media merchants) who sustain his narrative of victimhood, despite his recent convictions for sexual abuse and defamation by juries of his peers, a conviction by a judge for civil fraud, and pending criminal cases regarding election tampering, the January 6th insurrection, and the questionable retention of classified documents. George Lakoff, a well-known cognitive linguist, argues that the manipulator relies on *metaphorical framing*, which affects "cognition and beliefs in an unconscious way" through "mapping processes that structure thought."[8] To turn the "switch off," one must understand the manipulator's metaphors as well as one's own and then "start with the truth; indicate the lie without amplifying it; and return to, and repeat, truths."[9] Thus, theoretically, *metaphorical framing* could also serve as a weapon to counter the manipulator, though it is said that master liars tend to endure until they finally succumb to "actual events."[10] Examples of *metaphorical framing* by Trump are epithets such as "Deep State," "Witch Hunt," and "Fake News," which are aimed publicly and repeatedly at enemies who are transformed into victimizers, including the Justice Department, the liberal media, and anyone who contradicts his relentless lies. An example of *metaphorical framing* against the MAGA leader is former Attorney General William Barr's famous declaration that "Trump will burn down the GOP," with all the connotations that such a metaphor might evoke.[11]

Stacey Aronson (in this volume) quotes Sancho from Salman Rushdie's satirical novel *Quichotte* to underscore polarized perceptions of reality in present-day America (180). She also quotes George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal study *Metaphors We Live By* to remind us that "truth is always relative to a conceptual system."[12] Her essay examines celebrated interactions between Don Quijote and Sancho in Cervantes's text—that is, the interactions between an old country gentleman of modest means turned knight errant who is allegedly driven mad by excessive readings of books of chivalry and an illiterate, credulous peasant who wants to believe in his master's bookish fantasies to escape his poverty and improve his family's lot. Aronson contends that Sancho is "prone to disinformation," yet one might argue that he often displays a good dose of skepticism toward his master's assertions, that he eventually claims a salary, and that he reveals himself to be quite inventive in dealing with Don Quijote, as seen in the brilliant episode of the enchanted Dulcinea.[11] We could also cite other interactions between the two to underscore Sancho's ability to reflect not only on his master's state of mind and his own economic stake in the relationship, but also on their different perceptions of reality (as was the case with Mambrino's helmet and Don Quijote's recounting of his visions in the Cave of Montesinos). The staged carnivalesque pranks experienced by Sancho as the "governor" of the "insula Barataria" (a town under the jurisdiction of the idle and sadistic aristocrats known as the Duke and the Duchess) eventually cause him to waver on the desirability of such a position and prompts him to reflect nostalgically on his peasant life. Yet, in the end, Sancho pleads with his dying master not to succumb to death so that they might continue a wandering life in imitation of the shepherds who inhabited the world of pastoral romances. In this sense, it is significant that Sancho is not ready to partake of his master's "desengaño" or "un-deception."

Aronson also undertakes a discussion of the impact of the printing press on the dissemination of *pliegos sueltos* (chapbooks), materials that lent themselves in large part to social and political propaganda that served the interests of state and Church.

Paul Michael Johnson discusses "the implications of bodily performance" in the medialogy of baroque Spain and asks "how the technologies of artificial intelligence might parallel the *technes* of theatrical artifice, and thus how another society in the throes of epistemological instability coped with newfound challenges to its sense of reality."[14] The pedagogical aim of the essay is to offer "mutual lessons in visual information literacy and . . . critical spectatorship." Johnson reflects on the lessons we can extract from the emergence and practices of "critical spectatorship" among those who attended the popular theater performances of early modern Spain. Let us recall that those plays were written in verse form with a high level of rhetorical fabrication, which often left the audience dumbfounded, *bocabierta.* Such a culture was generally one "of seductive persuasion [that] lends itself eminently to manipulation."[15] Let us also remember that Cervantes's critique of the "comedia nueva," which he characterizes as a "mercadería vendible" (marketable commodity), is destined for consumption by a largely non-discerning audience, a consideration that, together with the lack of currency of Cervantes's later plays, propels him to have them published in *Ocho comedias y ocho entremeses nunca representados* (1615) with an explanation given in *Adjunta al Parnaso:* "porque se vea de espacio / lo que pasa apriesa." A discerning reader is more likely to resist a culture of seduction ending in manipulation, for such "a reader is his or her own director, so to speak, who can well convert the character's words into notes of anguish or alienation. The reader can realize that possibility if able to 'see slowly what transpires quickly'; to examine critically what is likely to be trivialized in a theatrical performance."[16]

Carmen Moreno-Nuño underscores the importance of historical perspective and contextualization in assessing the role played by disinformation and argues for deconstructive strategies to unmask its mechanisms and facilitate alternative readings. Following an introductory discussion of the current state of disinformation studies and comments on the fragmented and polarizing media and political environments in the United States and Spain, her essay remarks on the recent film *Don't Look Up* (dir. McKay, 2021), which satirizes the complicity of political institutions, the media, business interests, and a non-discerning public susceptible to cultish charlatans while the world heads toward destruction. The essay's centerpiece consists of an analysis of two contrasting filmic representations of the episode of Baler, the last bastion of Spanish resistance in the Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War: *Los últimos de Filipinas* (dir. Antonio Román, 1945), in which "Duty to God and the Fatherland, the axis of the National-Catholic ideology, transforms suffering into sacrifice and death into martyrdom," a strategy that fit the propagandistic aims of the Franco dictatorship; and *1898: Los últimos de Filipinas* (dir. Salvador Calvo, 2016), which places the spectator within "the historical trauma of the loss of the Empire." The section on *Don't Look Up*, the paragraphs on the propagandistic role of media moguls in the United States *vis-à-vis* the Spanish-American War, and the references to Vox, an extreme right-wing Spanish political party somewhat homologous to the MAGA Republican movement in the United States, with their conspiracy theories, anti-immigration stands, and antifeminist orientation, expand the discussion on the reaches of disinformation and ways to combat it. As with several other essays in this volume (Castillo, Culleton, Nelson/Venkatesh), it also underscores the importance of *reality literacy*, or knowing how "our medialogy frames, edits, constructs reality," and possible ways to challenge misinformation through deconstructive strategies and the use of irony, humor, and satire.[17]

Hal Langfur explores the other side of "disinformation" when used as a technique of self-preservation against the economic interests of colonizers. His essay focuses on "the counterhegemonic potential of information and misinformation originating from or attributed to peoples of Indigenous and African descent" (60) as the Portuguese imperial administration sought to secure Brazil's southeastern Atlantic region (in the 1760s) and its authority in the backlands (in the 1780s) "along the internal border separating the captaincies of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro."[18] The essay makes clear that Portugal's efforts to exploit resources (including gold and diamonds) were not always successful due to the unreliability of informants who misdirected them, a practice, one might add, also employed during Spain's conquest and colonization of Amerindia. Moreover, as Castillo and Nelson remind us in their "Introduction," "the perversion of language and information in colonial contexts find an analogue in . . . the proliferation of manipulative rhetoric and disinformation in imperial and Counter-Reformation Spain," as was the case with an archeological fake (such as the abovementioned *Libros Plúmbeos*), written to contest the fraudulent monarchical chronicles that erased them from Spain's history with the ultimate aim of defending themselves against "imperial policies of cultural homogenization."[19] Unfortunately, such efforts would not yield positive results, judging by the corrosive edict that mandated the expulsion of the "Moriscos" from Spain (1609–1614), a case of ethnic cleansing that Cervantes would expose with masterful irony in *Don Quijote*.[20]

Carlos Amador discusses the present-day impact of social media platforms in Chile, Perú, and Bolivia, focusing especially on the hashtag *#Hispanidad* and its contribution to the formation of a "counterpublic" that "attempts to reframe and subvert public discourse."[21] His essay points to the circulation of blended or stitched videos on TikTok, as well as the use of the jagged, red Cross of Burgundy, a symbol of the coat of arms of Spain since the times of Ferdinand and Isabella toward the end of the fifteenth century, to feed a neocolonial mentality associated with ultra-right institutions and associations, an "antipublic . . . transnational confederation of Hispanophone fascists in commune with Roman Catholic ultra-right associations."[22] One wonders to what extent any "counterpublic" is a sizable segment of a shared community whose members' destinies are completely tangled, regardless of conflicting political views about the past as well as the present.

Nelson Varas-Díaz, Daniel Nevárez Araújo, and D.L. Miranda turn to "extreme decolonial dialogues" or "experiences" through metal music in order "to engage in critical reflections about oppressive practices faced by Latin American communities in light of coloniality, reflections intended to foster deep thought and creative ways to bring about change."[23] Their work is partially inspired by Aníbal Quijano's notion of coloniality and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (also important to the essay by Nelson and Venkatesh in this volume), in which *dialogues* between the oppressor and the oppressed "highlight the exchange of information pertaining to the effects of coloniality between equals."[24] Those *dialogues* are *extreme*, as the authors indicate, because they deal with death, violence, oppression, and political repression, topics that "tend to worry unfamiliar listeners," especially those in positions of power who are seen as having turned a blind eye to the burdens of a colonial past while, at the same time, praising its "civilizing" role. Thus, metal music is seen as a response to those who deny or downplay the "continuing consequences of coloniality" and disseminate their regressive views through various media.[25]

Antonio Gómez L-Quiñones problematizes current debates about countering misinformation, disinformation, lies, obfuscation, and fake news. He argues for an "emancipation pedagogy" in contrast to the practices of neoliberal media outlets and the academic establishment in the United States and Europe. His critique centers on the latter's sponsorship of "*critical thinking*, media literacy, or reflections on biases," an operation which he deems to be overly reliant on a "re-rationalized subject," an "individualized and competing self," for whom "the *community* . . . is just an afterthought."[26] Gómez L-Quiñones further contends that "this pedagogical or literacy-based *warfare* against informational deception will not address its own blind spots, its liberal and misleading leanings" and that "it will neither expose the historical reasons for which blatant lies socially *work* so successfully, nor the *moment of truth* concealed in these lies."[27] The essay is stimulating and substantive in its critique of the neo-liberal ideology of critical thinking as is often (but not always, one might add) sold and practiced in academia. At the same time, it is not clear how through "cleverness and determination" one might arrive at an emancipating pedagogy, at a "constituent collective will . . . [that] will free us from the impending perils and risks of being misinformed about a world in danger."[28] What also emerges from this reading is that, while there are shared concerns among the collaborators about the crisis at hand, there are, understandably, different diagnoses of the problem and different types of pedagogical proposals to address it. The literacy-based proposal of Castillo and Egginton (cited by a number of contributors), and the social pedagogy of Nelson and Venkatesh (see below) are cases in point, as the latter both incorporates the former and expands it along theoretical and practical lines in its generation of multiple types of concrete media projects that foster an inclusive, non-hierarchical social activism while going to extraordinary efforts to understand divergences of opinions, with the ultimate aim of combatting hate speech and other forms of discrimination.

Stephen Hessel favors a non-hierarchical "constructivist approach to pedagogy theorized by Lev Vygotsky and the motivational interviewing strategy from the realm of counseling psychology."[29] The space of this experiment is a university classroom, and the text is Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, a novel in which "facts" are constantly open to debate and interpretation, both within the fiction itself and among students who are trained to think critically, learn from one another, and gain an understanding of how our medialogy frames and constructs reality. In this sense, Hessel's flexible pedagogical approach also incorporates a key idea advanced by Castillo and Egginton in both *Medialogies* and *What Would Cervantes Do?*, one that is also premised on an understanding of how our medialogy operates to disassemble its game, not unlike what Cervantes does brilliantly in "El retablo de las maravillas," *Don Quijote*, and *Persiles y Sigismunda*.

As with several other contributors in this volume, Colleen Culleton acknowledges the usefulness of a literacy-based pedagogical model such as the one advanced by Castillo and Egginton, but she extends it to an analysis of the film *Don't Look Up* (2021) and the novel *Insensatez* (2004) by Horacio Castellanos Moya, which she reads in light of Saussure's classic ideas about the arbitrary nature of the sign. Culleton argues that the exploitation of its dissolution can lead to social disruption and violence, but that a reading of *Insensatez* can also help us to examine the crisis that emerges with exploiters such as Trump and others like him. The essay underscores the potential of fiction to serve as model for reflection on the importance of cultural knowledge and contextualization in human exchange.

Bradley Nelson and Vivek Venkatesh argue for an inclusive social pedagogy that seeks "to imbibe and supplant the hierarchical notions of knowledge production, exchange, and transfer—both within and without socio-political institutionalized structures, especially in the digitized and connected social media landscape."[30] It is a pedagogy that relies on "building critical thinking and information literacy skills at every level of society," with a focus on "partners," thus upending a hierarchical structure "upon which much modern educational theory is based and is practiced."[31] Their proposal for a social pedagogy also draws from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

(1968; English trans. 1970), which argues that liberation from oppression is a mutual process between oppressors and oppressed. Freire's pedagogy posits that, through tolerance, dialogue, and respecting the ways of being others, we also learn about ourselves and become open to the possibility of change. The social pedagogy of Nelson and Venkatesh considers, as did Freire's, asymmetrical power relations due to specific historical, social, and economic factors. Moreover, they are also cognizant that today, at a time when hyperinflationary social media platforms disseminate misinformation at vertiginous speed and contribute to the polarization of views amplified in echo chambers, there is, perhaps, more need than ever for an inclusive social pedagogy with "a participatory structure [that] invites the active engagement of the oppressed." One of their ongoing programs (the "Cervantes Public Project") uses online publications and podcasts "to implement Cervantine irony in the reading of reality, what Castillo and Egginton have called *reality literacy*."[16]

In the end, one might ask which institutions can be trusted to mediate between individuals and reality in a reliable manner and what are the roles played within them by scholars and educators at all levels of society. At a time when disinformation is used relentlessly as a weapon against "the establishment and institutions" through "the insurgent use of meme wars" and presents existential risks for humanity, individual involvement is best positioned within effective organizations.[17] And while the one that is most directly connected to us—the university—has become both a target and a battlefield in disputes exacerbated by disinformation, as some of the stimulating essays in this volume have shown, it is also one of the sites where models for analysis are designed and practiced both inside and outside of the classroom. One might also say that a shared notion of closeness to the various objects of study, to students and colleagues, and to the communities we serve, can offer common ground for scientists and humanities scholars to work cooperatively in this fundamental mission.

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Notes

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31.

2. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity,* 2.

3. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. John J. Allen (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003), II:16.

4. See Luis Martín-Estudillo and Nicholas Spadaccini, "A 'Preposterous' Cervantes for Neo-Baroque Times," in *Handling the Truth. A Debates Volume on What Would Cervantes Do? Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*, eds. Stephen Hassel and Brian M. Phillips, *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 11 (2023): 132–41.

5. In this volume, 22.

6. David Castillo and William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (New å: Bloomsbury, 2016), 220.

7. See Bradley J. Nelson, "From Critical Reading to Collective Action: A Progressive Reading of Castillo and Eggiton's Notion of Reality Literacy," in *Handling the Truth. A Debates Volume on What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature*, eds. Stephen Hassel and Brian M. Phillips, *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 11 (2023): 14–30; Marcel Danesi, *Politics, Lies, and Conspiracy Theories: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2023).

8. Cited by Danesi, *Politics, Lies, and Conspiracy Theories*, 92, 96.

9. Ibid., 100.

10. Ibid., 100.

11. Ibid., 100.

12. In this volume, 181.

13. Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, II:10.

14: In this volume, 202.

15. Wlad Godzich and Nicholas Spadaccini, eds., *Literature among Discourses: The Spanish Golden Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 47.

16. Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Talens, *Cervantes and the Self-Made World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32.

Note

17. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 220.

18. In this volume, 61.

19. Ibid., 9.

20. See Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, II:64.

21. In this volume, 76.

22. Ibid., 89.

23. Ibid., 104.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 103.

26. Ibid., 224, 231; emphasis original.

27. Ibid., 232; emphasis original.

28. Ibid., 237.

29. Ibid., 165

30. Ibid., 142.

31. Ibid., 148.

32. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 220.

33. Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 23.

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