

Spurious digital discourse pathologisation: A Twitter-based exploration

Human beings, and certain social institutions too, act as epistemic agents in a variety of practices involving the impartation of information. Depending on its quantity, reliability, trustworthiness, relevance, timeliness, convenience, helpfulness and usefulness, informers are granted epistemic trust or deprived of it, i.e. they are regarded as reliable and trustworthy informers. If informers are deemed unreliable and untrustworthy, they may even be pathologised. Pathologisation is the discourse process whereby a person is presented or portrayed as sick, irrational, insane or inhuman. In the realm of practices involving dispensing information, pathologisation purports to (i) reduce the credibility of an informer, (ii) gaslight them, and/or (iii) silence them (Cull 2019; Hagen 2020). Ultimately, pathologisation seeks to present the informer as a threat, so it aims to reshape their identity or enact a new one for them. Although pathologisation may be legitimate, it often is illegitimate and is prompted, among others, by misinformation and conspiracy theories.

This presentation will focus on spurious pathologisation. It will explore how it is attempted on a social medium which has become, among others, a venue for giving information: the microblogging platform Twitter. It will rely on a dataset of tweets reacting to messages posted by an allegedly reliable and trustworthy information source: the World Health Organisation (WHO). The messages triggering the responses under scrutiny concern vaccination, the use of facemasks, social distancing and other sanitary measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. The exploration will dissect the actions that the platform users perform in order to illegitimately pathologise the WHO. It will show that, along with imprecations or the expression of dismissive incomprehension (Cull 2019), insults and the expression of disagreement are prevalent actions in order to illegitimately attempt to enact a new identity for the WHO.

References

- Cull, Matthew J. 2019. Dismissive incomprehension: A use of purported ignorance to undermine others. *Social Epistemology. A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 33 (3): 262–271.
- Hagen, Kurtis. 2020. Should academics debunk conspiracy theories? *Social Epistemology. A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 34 (5): 423–439.

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