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POLITICS OF
DISINFORMATION

WILEY Blackwell

Politics of Disinformation

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The Influence of Fake News on the Public Sphere

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In memory of Pere Masip Masip (1968-2021)

Contents

Introduction

Concerns about disinformation have witnessed extraordinary growth since the mid-2010s, despite the spread of false and distorted messages in the public arena not being a new phenomenon. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary declared "post-truth" its word of the year, highlighting a historical and political time in which disinformation strategies reached new heights, fueled by the hybridization of the communicative ecosystem (Chadwick 2017) in a context of increasing polarization and populism. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the Brexit referendum the same year were milestones in the awareness of the role that manipulative messages play and their effects on political decisions, particularly in times of crisis (Spence et al. 2016).

Disinformation strategies take advantage of social networks to go viral quickly, and benefit from another of these networks' inherent characteristics: their ability to discriminate and stratify the public according to the most diverse criteria (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019). Any person or company with a sufficiently large and specialized database can now distribute content among the public according to multiple criteria, allowing much more to be known about their tastes, hobbies, opinions, etc. than in the past. In fact, data on the public's participation on social networks (who they follow, in which groups they participate, what content they share, etc.) are one of the main elements that help increase the effectiveness of the messages sent to the public. The snowball of disinformation can, in fact, sustain itself and improve its effectiveness in each wave (Tucker et al. 2018).

The potential of social networks to disseminate disinformation rises in importance while their role as main sources of information gains strength (Gottfried and Shearer 2017), especially during electoral processes (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Given that disinformation takes advantage of increasingly polarized public opinion (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2017; Lewandowsky et al. 2017), its pernicious effects on political debate and decision-making demand greater knowledge of the reasoning behind the dissemination of disinformation (Flynn et al. 2017).

Post-truth consequences in democracy have received much social, political, and academic attention in recent years. This book is a collection of international studies that are representative of leading research focusing on disinformation. It is structured in parts that correspond to the book's four main objectives: first, to offer theoretical approaches to disinformation; second, to analyze the role of disinformation in politics;

third, to expand on disinformation fact-checking strategies; and finally, to further explore the exposure and effects of disinformation.

The three chapters included in Part I of the book provide the theoretical basis to understand disinformation. In "Disinformation Matters: Analyzing the Academic Production" (Chapter 1), Nereida Cea and Bella Palomo explain how this topic has become a fertile, priority, and worldwide line of research. In "A Materialist Approach to Fake News" (Chapter 2), Thales Lelo and Roseli Fígaro systematize the main trends in current scholarship regarding fake news to propose a materialistic approach to the issue. They try to elucidate socio-historical aspects that connect fake news with profound transformations in capital accumulation cycles. Chapter 3, "Using International Relations Theories to Understand Disinformation: Soft Power, Narrative Turns, and New Wars" by Giuseppe Anzera and Alessandra Massa, describes how disinformation is affected by long-standing trends and the competitive manipulation of information through actions designed to reshape reality to attain political goals.

Part II, *Disinformation in Politics*, focuses on recent international cases of disinformation in political campaigns. Rose Marie Santini, Giulia Tucci, Débora Salles and Alda Rosana D. de Almeida analyze the role of instant messaging services that enable disinformation to be spread during elections, in "Do You Believe in Fake After All? WhatsApp Disinformation Campaign During the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election" (Chapter 4). Masduki, in Chapter 5, "The Politics of Disinformation in Indonesia (2014–2019)," examines the growth of disinformation practices in developing democracies, such as Indonesia, and the detrimental effects of fake news, hoaxes, and misleading information in election years. The next chapter, "Ideology and Disinformation: How False News Stories Contributed to Brexit" (Chapter 6), by Imke Henkel, offers an insight into how British newspapers, notably the tabloid press, filled their pages with hostility toward European institutions for decades and influenced public opinion on Brexit. Lorena Cano-Orón, Germán Llorca-Abad and Guillermo López-García close this part of the book with Chapter 7, "Spanish Politicians Dealing with Fake News in the April 2019 General Election," aiming to detect the creation and spread of fake news on Twitter by Spanish political parties during the April 2019 general election campaign.

Part III, *Fact-checking in Politics*, emphasizes the role of several initiatives that have been implemented to combat disinformation. Dolors Palau-Sampio and Adolfo Carratalá compare three fact-checking projects in "Checking Verifications: Focus and Scope of Collaborative Projects to Monitor Election Campaigns in France, Brazil, and Spain" (Chapter 8), to delve into the aims and limitations that they present. Tomás Dodds, in "Structures of Resistance: Citizen-generated Reporting in Times of Social Unrest" (Chapter 9), examines the practices that emerged from civil society to fight against disinformation and fake news in Chile during the so-called October Revolution, the waves of antigovernment protests and cultural manifestations across the country. Eva Campos-Domínguez, Cristina Renedo Farpón, Dafne Calvo, and María Díez-Garrido focus on automated verification to discover how political parties and fact-checking organizations in Spain deal with disinformation during electoral campaigns and the appropriateness of the adopted measures in "Robot Strategies for Combating Disinformation in Election Campaigns: A Fact-checking Response from Parties and Organizations" (Chapter 10). The last chapter of this part of the book, "'That Prodigious Machinery Designed to Exclude': The Discourse of Post-truth in Algorithmic Culture" (Chapter 11), by Jakub Nowak, offers a theoretical approach to the post-truth

phenomenon as being inherently tied to how digital public spheres work, by tracking its connections with the transformation of media markets and changing patterns of news distribution.

Finally, Part IV, *The Effects of Disinformation on Everyday Life*, includes three chapters that address different perspectives on exposure to disinformation. In "Teens, Social Media, and Fake News: A User's Perspective" (Chapter 12), Heidi Mercenier, Victor Wiard and Marie Dufrasne analyze how teenagers receive, perceive, and interact with fake news on social media, drawing on focus groups composed of high-school students. Carlos Rodríguez-Pérez and Gustavo R. García-Vargas, in "Understanding Which Factors Promote Exposure to Online Disinformation" (Chapter 13), examine the conditions under which citizens are more resilient or more likely to be associated with exposure to and concern about online disinformation in four Latin-American countries and 17 Western democracies. The final chapter, "Rumoring, Disinformation, and Contentious Politics in the Digital Age: The Case of China and Beyond" (Chapter 14) by Jun Liu, presents an alternative understanding of rumor as disinformation, focusing on contentious politics in an authoritarian context like the People's Republic of China.

This book is dedicated to one of its co-editors, Professor Dr Pere Masip, who passed away on July 18, 2021. Pere was an inspiring teacher and a rigorous researcher with vast knowledge; he had an insatiable intellectual curiosity that emerged from his wide-ranging education in archaeology, documentation, and journalism. His thoroughness, search for excellence, enormous capacity for work, and passion for research allowed him to easily lead projects and build cross-border networks and initiatives, which came together through digital journalism. His skills forged a professional reputation that has left an enduring legacy at his university and were surpassed only by his human qualities and enormous generosity with colleagues and students, because Pere Masip was one of those people who made this world better.

For us, the other co-editors of this book, the death of our colleague Pere has been a tremendous and unexpected shock because, despite the seriousness of his illness, we had been affected by his optimism for recovery; he threw himself into his academic work with enthusiasm and commitment until the end. He had suggested we create this book—a project about which he was enormously excited—after attending the 2019 IAMCR pre-conference in Valencia, "Disinformation and Political Processes: Media Strategies and Audience Attitudes," which also arose from his inexhaustible energy and generosity. It has been a joy and a privilege to know, learn from, work, and live with Professor Pere Masip; his premature passing has affected us all. His memory will endure in his work, in all the many people who knew him, and in our hearts.

Pere, thank you for your help, and for inspiring and guiding us for so many years.

Acknowledgements

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Part I

Theoretical Approaches to Disinformation

1

Disinformation Matters

Analyzing the Academic Production

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Introduction

The experts predict that in 2022 the citizens of developed countries will be consuming more disinformation than genuine news, because lies are 70% more likely to go viral and be retweeted in comparison with verified information (Vosoughi et al. 2018). It is estimated that 115 fabricated stories favoring Donald Trump were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times during the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This figure confirms the impact attained by isolated content, disseminated on alternative rather than traditional news channels. This is shaping a dangerous news diet that can generate distrust toward the media and damage the democratic quality of society by encouraging civic apathy, destabilization, chaos (Waisbord 2018), a reduction of pluralism, and a strengthening of polarized communities in which fake news and conspiracy theories are freely propagated. Specialized approaches also warn of a decline of scientific culture in the age of fake news, threatening the scientific and economic progress of Western countries (Elías 2019).

Audiences are conscious of the ambiguity, lack of control, and weakness that accompany the hybrid media system in which such practices have come to maturity. This is why one of their main concerns is the manipulation of journalistic news stories to serve political or economic interests, as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report testified in 2018. This panorama explains why disinformation has become the principal challenge and concern in communication in the twenty-first century, and why its transmedia and cross-border dimension requires public policies and specific training in order to limit its spread.

The scientific community has reacted actively, since academic attention can contribute to sustainable digital development by designing solutions that lead to an innovative society that is also reflexive, responsible, and secure, in the context of an unprecedented transformation in communication patterns. This chapter confirms that studies linked to disinformation have become a fertile and priority line of research. This intensity of production respects the proposal made by the High Level Group on Fake News and Online Information of the European Commission to formulate continuous investigation on the issue in order to evaluate the measures adopted by the different actors.

Mapping recent developments in the scholarship on fake news and misinformation has previously been undertaken in the sphere of health (Wang et al. 2019), selectively in the area of communication (Jankowski 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018), and by applying an interdisciplinary approach that involved disciplines like psychology, economics, and political science as well as communication (Ha et al. 2019), analyzing investigations registered on the databases of Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Pubmed. The novelty of the present chapter lies in the breadth of the sample used, since previous review articles had examined between 2 and 142 journal articles.

Methodological Approach

Forty years after the publication of the first articles indexed in Web of Science related to disinformation, it seems timely to construct an x-ray of its presence in academic research in order to objectively set out the scope achieved. To this end a mixed methodology is applied, which combines bibliographical with bibliometric analysis to gather qualitative and quantitative data, enabling the volume and impact of scientific publications to be measured.

This chapter therefore aims to analyze the scientific production on disinformation issues published in journals indexed in the *Web of Science Core Collection* (WoS) without any temporal restriction, that is, from 1900 until August 2020. The sample was put together on the basis of articles housed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) database, which is the most relevant and pertinent index for the area of Communication. Following the analysis of the conceptual articles related to disinformation (Wardle 2017, 2018; Tandoc et al. 2018), a list of terms used for the consultation was designed. The following search string was applied:

> (disinformation* OR misinformation* OR "misleading information*" OR "manipulated new*" OR "fake new*" OR "fact* check*" OR "false content*" OR "false new*" OR "post-truth" OR "verification tool*" OR "verif* process*" OR "information* disorder*" OR "hybrid media system").

This search was conducted on the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the articles published by all SSCI publications, without considering book reviews or proceedings. Initially, 536 references were localized in the general category of Social Sciences, and this list was subjected to a bibliometric analysis referring to the following indicators: temporal evolution, authorship, affiliation, language, country of production, journal, and most-cited articles.

A codifier examined all the articles in full, eliminated reiterations, and for the content analysis selected only those empirical investigations whose pivotal issue was disinformation, obtaining a final sample of 434 articles. In addition, a deductive codebook was implemented, and labels created manually on Zotero were applied in order to classify and categorize the information. In this second phase the registered variables belonged to the following categories: (i) theme; (ii) subtheme; (iii) platform analyzed; (iv) methodological focus; and (v) tools employed. The

thematic classification used a standard taxonomy proposed by the International Communication Association (ICA), which establishes 24 sections within the Communication area.

The following pages present a chronological evolution of the interest that disinformation has aroused in the academic sphere, which journals have provided more extensive coverage, the most productive geographical areas, the most-cited works, the most outstanding authors and their affiliations, the co-authorships generated, the approaches addressed, and the methodologies employed in these investigations.

Results

Bibliometric Analysis

A quantitative analysis of the keywords introduced in searches for articles in WoS made it possible to observe the conceptual preferences of the researchers. Terminologically, "fake news" headed the ranking as the most used keyword (199 articles), as shown in Figure 1.1, followed by "misinformation" (189), "disinformation" (111), "post-truth" (105), "fact check" (79), "hybrid media system" (35), "misleading information" (11), "false news" (10), "verification process" (4), "manipulated news" (2), "information disorder" (1), "fact checking platform" (1), and "false content" (1). A cross analysis by area also revealed some interesting contrasts, such as that the word "misinformation" is more frequently used in Psychology and Political Sciences, while "fake news" and "fact check" are more usual in Communication.

A longitudinal study of the use of these concepts in the academic literature evinces the growing interest in this area of investigation, especially from 2016 onwards, when "post-truth" was chosen as word of the year (Wang 2016) due to the notoriety it had achieved during the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election (Jankowski 2018), which resulted in the appearance of numerous publications from 2017 onwards (Table 1.1). Although mentions in the academic record dating back four decades have been localized, these studies were carried out sporadically. Proof of this is that up until 2012 one or two articles at the most appeared each year, which contrasts with the 179 new publications registered in 2019 alone, accounting for one third of the sample. The COVID-19 crisis has significantly influenced the level of production, continuously accelerating the various phases involved in publication, which is why it is foreseeable that at the end of 2020 the number of articles and publications registered will be higher than that achieved the previous year.

With respect to searching by concepts to determine their longevity, analysis of the texts indexed in WoS confirms that in 1980 the first article appeared that included the word "fact-check" in its title. It was published in the professional journal *Columbia Journalism Review* (Ridder 1980) and described and compared the work developed by fact-checkers in US newsrooms. In 1983 a newspaper chronicle by Robert Kaplan tackled disinformation in Greece in pioneering fashion in that same journal, and in the 1990s several authors analyzed the news coverage of AIDS, some of which was considered "deliberate misinformation" (Price and Hsu 1992; Bird
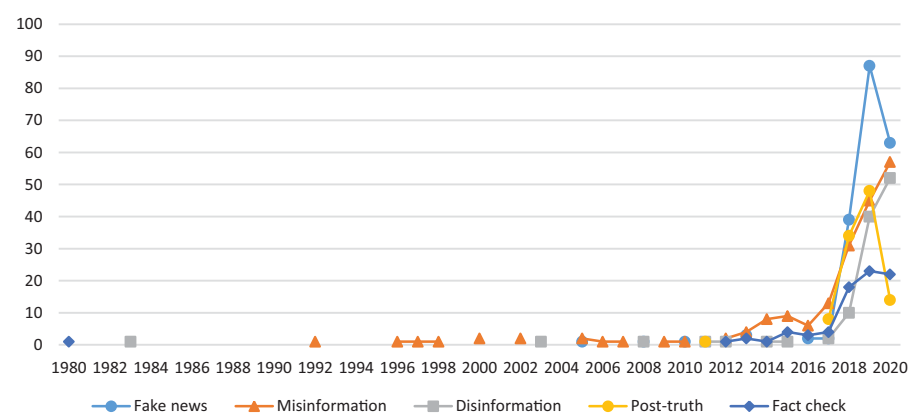
Evolution during the last decade (2010–2020)

Year	"Fake news"	"Misinformation"	"Disinformation"	"Fact check"	"Post-truth"
2010	1	1	0	0	0
2011	0	0	1	0	1
2012	0	2	1	1	0
2013	3	4	0	2	0
2014	0	8	1	1	0
2015	0	9	1	4	0
2016	2	6	0	3	0
2017	2	13	2	4	8
2018	39	31	10	18	34
2019	87	45	40	23	48
2020*a*	63	57	52	22	14

Figure 1.1 Evolution of the use of "disinformation," "fake news," "misinformation," "fact check," and "post-truth" in articles indexed in WoS (1980–2020[a]).

[a]From January to August 2020.

1996). However, "fake news," currently the most widespread term of those analyzed, was not used until 2005 (Baym 2005). The texts that appear in this paragraph and other similar ones have been excluded from the qualitative analysis of this chapter as they lack an explicit methodology, but they must be mentioned because they show the existence of a historical debate within the journalistic profession on the veracity of content, although that concern has intensified and been addressed with greater scientific rigor more recently. The current stage has also favored the emergence of new concepts, such as "junk news," which refers to sources that deliberately publish misleading, deceptive, or incorrect information packaged as real news (Bradshaw et al. 2020), or "news-ness," the extent to which audiences characterize specific content as news (Edgerly and Vraga 2020).

Table 1.1 Annual production indexed in WoS

Year	Matches	%	Year	Matches	%	Year	Matches	%
2020[a]	151	28.2	2011	4	0.6	2002	2	0.4
2019	179	33.4	2010	4	0.7	2000	2	0.4
2018	97	18.1	2009	1	0.2	1999	1	0.2
2017	30	5.6	2008	2	0.4	1998	1	0.2
2016	13	2.4	2007	1	0.2	1997	1	0.2
2015	16	3.0	2006	2	0.4	1996	1	0.2
2014	9	1.7	2005	3	0.6	1992	1	0.2
2013	9	1.7	2005	3	0.6	1992	1	0.2
2013	9	1.7	2005	3	0.6	1992	1	0.2
2012	3	0.6	2003	1	0.2	1980	1	0.2

[a]From January to August 2020.

In this context there is a predominance of articles with multiple authorship (70%), a decision that is probably justified by the complexity of the phenomenon and a multidisciplinary approach. This analysis makes it possible to compile the list of the most productive and reputed authors in this line of research, led by three women, Emily Vraga (13 articles), Leticia Bode (8), and Michelle Amazeen (7), followed by Lucas Graves, Michael Hameleers, Edson C. Tandoc Jr. (6), H. Lee, Richard Ling, and Chris Wells (5). In terms of affiliation, 14 universities account for a quarter of the entire production analyzed, with North American institutions occupying a dominant position. Outstanding in this respect is the University of Wisconsin, where the greatest number of articles registered in WoS (22) are generated, followed by the universities of Boston (15), Pennsylvania Commonwealth System of Higher Education, London (12), George Mason, Minnesota, Austin Texas (11), Georgetown, Harvard, Northwestern, Ohio State, Amsterdam, Oxford, and, in Singapore, Nanyang Technological University (10).

This domination of the research influences the language that predominates in the articles. Ninety-one percent of production is in English (487 articles), while Spanish comes a long way behind with 41 articles (7.6%). With insignificant percentages there are three articles in German, another three in Russian, one in Slovene, and another in Catalan.

In keeping with the geographical distribution of universities, the countries that show the greatest number of academic publications related to the issue (Table 1.2) are led by the United States (45.5% of the articles analyzed), followed by the United Kingdom (11.8%) and Spain (11%). Nonetheless, the proof that disinformation is a global and widespread concern lies in the fact that the investigations originate from some fifty countries, amongst which the European continent takes on an important role as 45.8% of those countries are located there.

The total number of journals from the Communication field that have published research related to disinformation is 64. Journals housing more than 5% of the total publications were considered to be the most committed to this issue; making calls for

Table 1.2 The 10 countries that produce the greatest volume of articles related to disinformation

| Country	Matches	%
USA	249	46.5
United Kingdom	63	11.8
Spain	59	11.0
Australia	27	5.0
Germany	27	5.0
Netherlands	21	3.9
Canada	16	2.9
Singapore	13	2.4
Denmark	12	2.2
Switzerland	12	2.2

special issues has an influence on this. The most active are *El Profesional de la Información* and *Social Media + Society*, which surpass thirty registers each, *New Media & Society* and the *International Journal of Communication* (26), and *Digital Journalism* (24). *Journalism Practice* (23), *Information, Communication & Society*, and *Political Communication* (20) come close to these figures.

The exponential growth experienced in recent years by studies on disinformation has also had a positive influence on their impact. As a general figure, the average number of citations in other high impact publications obtained per article in Web of Science is 8.6. Table 1.3 shows the five most-cited articles, characterized by their addressing contexts and employing diverse methodologies, although politics is the central pivot in three of the investigations. The most referenced amongst them is "The Daily Show: Discursive integration and the reinvention of political journalism" (Baym 2005), a classic case study of the discipline that pioneered the use of "fake news." Close behind is a recently published conceptual investigation, the work of Tandoc et al. (2018) titled "Defining fake news: A typology of scholarly definitions," which in only two years has achieved 219 citations, thanks to the taxonomy proposed. The third article is an essay that analyzes Donald Trump's Twitter feed and concludes that his success is due to simple, impulsive, and uncivil discourses (Ott 2017). The fourth place is occupied by Engesser et al. (2017), who develop a qualitative study on the rise of populism on Facebook and Twitter comparing four scenarios: Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and United Kingdom. Also on this list is an article that, by employing experimental techniques based on exposing users to misinformation content, evaluates the cognitive processes involved in processing verification and analyzes the incidence of corrections in the perception of news (Bode and Vraga 2015).

With respect to the analysis of co-citation, implemented with the VOS viewer application, five research clusters can be observed, connected by Edson Tandoc as the central node (Figure 1.2).

Table 1.3 Most-cited articles (total accumulated citations)

Article	Authors	Journal	Year	Total citations	Average citations per year
The Daily Show: Discursive integration and the reinvention of political journalism	Baym, Geoffrey	*Political Communication*	2005	229	14.3
Defining fake news: A typology of scholarly definition	Tandoc Jr., Edson C.; Lim, Zheng Wei; Ling, Richard	*Digital Journalism*	2018	219	73
The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement	Ott, Brian L.	Critical Studies in Media Communication	2017	128	32
Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology	Engesser, Sven; Ernst, Nicole; Esser, Frank; Buechel, Florin	*Information Communication & Society*	2017	125	31.3
In related news, that was wrong: The correction of misinformation through related stories functionality in social media	Bode, Leticia; Vraga, Emily K.	*Journal of Communication*	2015	92	15.3
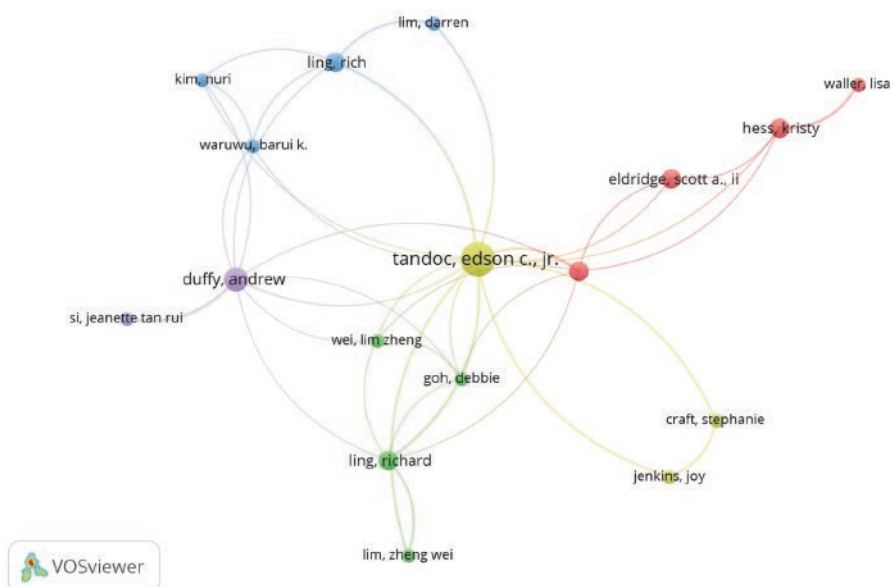
Figure 1.2   Research clusters concerning disinformation.

Bibliographic Analysis

Politics, the Realm of Disinformation

An initial content analysis of the articles examined shows that they address a broad variety of themes (Table 1.4), although four areas account for 93% of the articles: Political Communication (37.56%), Mass Communication (36.18%), Journalism Studies (12.44%), and Health Communication (6.91%).

The search for the causes and consequences of disinformation in the political sphere has been undertaken in numerous countries, but the majority of studies focus on the United States. Rojecki and Meraz (2016) are the authors of one of the pioneering studies on misinformation, in which they analyze facts, half-truths, and untruths during the presidential election of 2004; they conclude that by itself the web is not sufficient for spreading misinformation, but it can influence or set the agenda for traditional media. For the 2008 election, in which Obama confronted McCain, Weeks and Garrett carried out a national telephone survey to examine the consequences of inaccurate political rumors and found that believing rumors about an opposed candidate reinforced a vote for the preferred candidate (Weeks and Garrett 2014). In the 2012 election there was a tendency to analyze activity on Twitter, where Republicans evinced stronger outgroup negativity and hostility toward fact-checkers than Democrats (Shin and Thorson 2017). However, the scientific production that accompanied the 2016 presidential election was more fertile, because the disinformation order generated an unprecedented democratic disruption (Bennett and Livingston 2018). These strategies have made Trump a referent in studies on disinformation; he is mentioned in 200 articles, 45.9% of the sample.

The case of Brazil has also attracted academic interest, especially due to the rise of right-wing extremist Jair Bolsanaro to the presidency and the resentment toward the Partido dos Trabalhadores, which were achieved by publishing messages in

Table 1.4 Distribution of articles by theme

General categories	Matches	%
Political Communication	163	37.6
Mass Communication	157	36.2
Journalism Studies	54	12.4
Health Communication	30	6.9
Ethnicity and Race in Communication	9	2.1
Interpersonal Communication	6	1.4
Philosophy, Theory, and Critique	5	1.2
Environmental Communication	4	0.9
Feminist Scholarship	2	0.5
Children, Adolescents, and Media	1	0.2
Information Systems	1	0.2
Organizational Communication	1	0.2
Public Relations	1	0.2