

Universities and the challenge of disinformation

CALL FOR PAPERS



The [“University Democracy” Mission of Nantes University](#), in collaboration with the Nantes Center for Educational Research, the “Forger” Chair —which holds the “Science with and for Society” label —and the Initiative network, invites you to **contribute to the international conference “Universities and the challenge of disinformation,”** to be held on November 5 and 6th, 2026, in Nantes (France).

→ **Presentation:** What roles for the University in the age of disinformation?

The 2026 international conference on the role of the university in the face of scientific disinformation follows on from the two previous conferences organized by the “University Democracy” Mission of Nantes University and its partners. Whilst the 2025 edition focused on academic freedom within university democracy, the 2026 edition builds on these reflections, drawing in particular on the recommendations made by the Council of Europe as part of its ‘Academic Freedom in Action’ project, which affirms the ambition to ‘protect and promote the values of academic freedom, ensuring that higher education remains a bastion of democracy and critical thinking’. From this perspective, **the mission of universities is no longer limited to producing and transmitting knowledge: it extends to the development, for both staff and students, of critical skills enabling them to assess the validity of arguments and information.**

These issues are particularly topical. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary named ‘**post-truth**’ as its ‘word of the year’. This adjective refers to situations in which ‘objective facts have less influence on public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. The following year, in 2017, against the backdrop of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, the Collins Dictionary in turn highlighted the term ‘**fake news**’. In 2024, five years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Economic Forum ranked ‘**disinformation**’ as the most significant global risk, deeming it even more serious and urgent than climate change.

These lexical choices are underpinned by a series of concrete events during which **scientific and expert opinion has been publicly challenged, downplayed or dismissed**. The climate-sceptic positions adopted by the president of the world’s leading economic power, the controversies surrounding the political management of the Covid-19 pandemic, and targeted budget cuts in medical research have all been

instances in which **scientific knowledge has been accused of being erroneous, ideological or manipulated by political and economic powers.**

In this context, the university might appear as a place where the pursuit of ‘truth’ remains preserved. As an institution historically responsible for the production and dissemination of knowledge, it possesses a particular legitimacy to intervene in contemporary debates concerning disinformation. **This position is, however, now under threat:** the university is under attack from certain regimes or political movements that portray it as an institution riddled with ideology, whilst its very legitimacy to intervene in the public sphere is increasingly contested or challenged.

Theme 1: ‘The University as a place of knowledge production: the battle for truth’

Based on the discourses mentioned above, ‘truth’ now appears to be a fragile ideal. **Frequently invoked in the public sphere, this concept requires several preliminary clarifications.** What exactly do we mean by ‘truth’? Does it have the same meaning as scientific knowledge, or should we, on the contrary, distinguish between these two domains? [Origi G.; 2024]

Whilst it is difficult to find a consensual definition of ‘truth’, particularly given the complexity of social phenomena, it is clear that many political actors claim privileged access to it. Others, conversely, seek to legitimize themselves by dismissing opposing narratives as lies. This narrative, which some authors describe as a ‘battle for truth’ [Aubert A., Boncourt T., Saint-Martin A.; 2025], tends to place individuals in a state of doubt, or even epistemic uncertainty, regarding the credibility of the statements presented to them.

Against this backdrop of heightened competition between discourses and information overload, experts are regularly called upon to provide knowledge presented as scientifically substantiated. Indeed, our relationship with scientific knowledge is most often indirect: it relies largely on a relationship of trust placed in experts and scientific institutions, who are presumed capable of establishing and conveying facts held to be true.

This mediation raises a central question: do we possess the necessary skills to assess the scientific nature of an expert opinion and to distinguish between what constitutes scientific knowledge and what does not? These questions point more broadly to the issue of authority: **who is capable of establishing the ‘truth’? Scientific and academic institutions? And on what grounds do we grant – or withdraw – our trust in them?**

In this media maelstrom, academics are regularly called upon as experts. Their legitimacy rests in particular on their qualifications and status, highlighted by the parties inviting them in order to lend weight to their positions. **However, the academic institution must now contend with growing attacks on academic freedom. It also faces the rise of what some authors refer to as ‘new scientific authorities’** in the marketplace of ideas (Huret R.; 2025).

Amid this profusion of information, another question takes center stage: **how can we distinguish between ideology and science?** Ideology can indeed mobilize science – or pseudoscience – to legitimize itself. As certain studies have shown, science can be used against itself by powerful lobbies, often linked to economic interests, to sow doubt, delay public decision-making or legitimize particular interests [Oreskes N., Conway E., Treiner J., Foucart S.; 2021].

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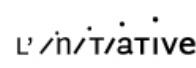
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Science can also be exploited or hijacked to serve ideological agendas. This particularly the case when certain historians or popularizers, claiming allegiance to the far right or neoconservative currents, appropriate the historical narrative in order to disseminate reactionary interpretations that diverge from the scientific consensus. Conversely, historians and other scientists who engage with the public sphere to inform public debate are increasingly exposed to attempts to discredit them, harassment on social media, and even legal proceedings.

Whether it be media personalities claiming scientific legitimacy on social media or large corporations with research capabilities that sometimes surpass those of public research, these actors are challenging and compelling the university to redefine its role, its responsibilities and the ways in which it engages with the public sphere. Consequently, what resources do universities have adapt to this new landscape, and what role can they play within it? Should they like the media faced with the proliferation of fake news, establish themselves as a forum for scientific fact-checking and claim to certify ‘the truth’?

Theme 2: The University as a place of learning: the challenge of disinformation

The Council of Europe emphasizes that the mission of universities cannot be limited to the mere production and transmission of knowledge: it now includes **the development, for both staff and student, of critical skills enabling them to assess the validity of arguments and information.** Theme 2 of this conference therefore aims to explore the ways in which the university can take on this mission. With this in mind, we identify at least three areas for consideration, without claiming to be exhaustive in our proposals.

1 – Gaining a better understanding of the student body and its practices

The issue of imparting critical skills at university cannot be separated from a detailed analysis of the audience it is aimed at. Students today are exposed to a multitude of discourses claiming scientific authority, particularly on social media, which has become a central source of information. The Reboot survey – Misinformation among young people in the age of social media, conducted by the Jean Jaurès Foundation, shows that nearly two-third of 18-24 years olds tend to place greater trust in information disseminated by the most popular influencers. In other words, the visibility of content – measured by the number of views or shares – appears to be a key criterion of credibility in the eyes of young audiences.

In this context, it seems relevant to examine students’ information practices: how they access information, how they use scientific or popular science content, and the degree of trust they place in these different forms of knowledge production and dissemination [Beriche M; 2023 & Frau-Meigs D.; 2011]. These questions also raise a methodological issue that has yet to be fully explored: that of measuring acceptance of false information. How can this acceptance be empirically understood? Which indicators should be used, and what limitations do exclusively quantitative approaches face when analyzing these phenomena?

2 – Teaching critical thinking skills

We postulate **that possessing critical skills enables students to resist disinformation.** This postulate – debatable from the outset – opens up several avenues for reflection. Should critical skills be conceived as cross-disciplinary skills, independent of specific subjects, or do they, on the contrary, fall within the disciplinary frameworks in which students are trained? Are certain disciplines more conducive than others

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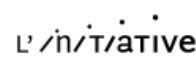
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to the development of these skills? The results of the Reboot survey on young people's acceptance of false information do indeed suggest notable differences across degree programs: students in health and law seem more likely to accept in than those enrolled in the humanities, who appear better equipped to guard against it.

Can these differences be linked to the way in which knowledge is integrated and transmitted within disciplines, particularly the degree of consensus surrounding the knowledge taught, which encourages students to question it to a greater or lesser extent? Are they linked to the existence of a critical tradition that is more or less deeply rooted depending on the disciplinary field, or to the place accorded in curricula to epistemology and reflexivity regarding knowledge?

University pedagogy is also a central issue. Do teaching methods influence the development of critical skills? Does the lecture format allow for their development, or do tutorials provide a more conducive environment? Do certain types of course exercises place students in a position where they are more likely to reflect on the knowledge being imparted?

Finally, **the question of assessment appears inseparable from students' relationship with knowledge.** Forms of assessment based on rote learning, such as multiple-choice questions, are often presented as ill-suited to questioning knowledge. Conversely, do certain assessment or learning methods better foster the development of critical thinking skills? At a time when a growing number of students are turning to generative artificial intelligence to revise, these questions seem more urgent than ever.

The effects of university pedagogy undoubtedly intersect with the university's increasingly vocational focus. Indeed, numerous studies highlight a gradual shift in the university's remit, which is becoming ever more oriented towards the economic sphere. The indicators used to evaluate courses, laboratories or institutions are based in particular on career prospects and integration into the labour market [Stavrou S.;2017].

These developments are accompanied by changes to curricula and teaching methods, particularly in relation to issues of professionalization, skills and the standardization of knowledge. These transformations, often analyzed through the lens of *New Public Management*, are likely to have an impact on students' relationship with knowledge and the development of their critical skills: the professionalization of higher education is thus frequently presented as a factor that may limit the adoption of a critical stance, by prioritizing immediately applicable knowledge at the expense of reflective distancing. Does the focus on employability not risk encouraging a form of conformity with the expectations of the professional world and employers? Similar questions are also emerging regarding certain methods of research funding. The experience of PhD theses conducted under CIFRE (Industrial Agreements for Training through Research) agreements, for example, has regularly raised questions regarding the feasibility of criticizing companies or institutions that directly fund research.

3 – Governing a university in the age of disinformation

At a time when digital ecosystems are profoundly reshaping the circulation of knowledge, universities are facing an intensification of disinformation. The virality of content, the fragmentation of public spaces and the weakening of traditional intermediaries facilitate the quick spread of inaccurate, biased or manipulated

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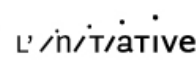
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information. In this context, **scientific authority – historically grounded in peer review and academic publication – comes into conflict with the dynamics of opinion and influence that prioritize immediacy and emotion. Governing a university therefore requires rethinking strategies for communication, mediation and transparency in order to preserve institutional credibility and the quality of public debate.**

Indeed, disinformation is closely linked to a growing mistrust of institutions, whether political, media-related or academic. Universities, as places where knowledge is produced and transmitted, sometimes become the target of smear campaigns or amplified controversies that call into question their impartiality, independence or social utility. This mistrust can undermine the legitimacy of governance decisions, whether they concern research policies, partnerships, educational choices or public stances. It also calls into question the ability of management teams to maintain a climate of internal trust amongst staff and students, whilst meeting the expectations of a society divided by informational and ideological rifts.

In light of these challenges, governing a university in an age of disinformation requires a multifaceted approach: developing critical and information literacy skills, strengthening mechanisms for scientific integrity, fostering greater dialogue with the media and civil society, and implementing proactive communication policies. The aim is not only to counter the effects of disinformation, but also to rebuild forms of trust based on transparency, participation and accountability. This conference therefore invites participants to **analyze contemporary transformations in university governance, to examine the tools and normative frameworks employed, and to explore innovative practices capable of consolidating academic legitimacy in an unstable information environment.**

Drawing on French and international research in information and communication sciences, political science, organizational sociology, and educational sciences, **this conference aims to address a series of fundamental questions concerning university governance in the face of disinformation, such as:** How does research on disinformation and polarization shed light on the mechanisms of mistrust towards universities? Can we identify empirical indicators of the erosion (or strengthening) of trust in academic institutions linked to the issue of disinformation? How can university leadership teams draw on research in the management of scientific controversies to develop appropriate strategies to counter disinformation campaigns targeting laboratories, researchers or university policies? How do studies on participatory governance and organizational democracy contribute to rethinking decision-making in a context of heightened mistrust? What critical thinking training programs can be integrated into institutional policies to strengthen the resilience of university communities in the face of fake news? How do studies on scientific integrity and open science redefine the conditions for the production and dissemination of knowledge in an unstable information environment? Does the openness of data and publication constitute a credible bulwark against suspicion and accusations of bias? Finally, how can we compare, on the basis of empirical research, the institutional responses of different higher education systems to controversies, information attacks or movements of mistrust?

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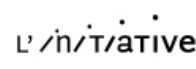
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Theme 3: The University as a space for reflective experimentation?

Theme 3 aims to promote formats and approaches that go beyond traditional academic communications to **highlight concrete, situated and reflective experiments**. The aim is to open up a space for dialogue between research and practice, recognizing the heuristic value of feedback, pilot schemes, organizational or pedagogical innovations, as well as initiatives from civil society. In a context marked by the accelerated circulation of information and mistrust of institutions, **these experiments provide ideal laboratories for observing, testing and evaluating operational responses to disinformation**.

Proposals may draw on theoretical frameworks from research (information and communication sciences, sociology, participation studies, political science, law, education and training sciences...) to analyze the conditions of implementation, the effects and the limitations of the initiatives presented. Contributions are particularly welcome on:

- **Educational initiatives** (fact-checking, approaches based on scientific controversies, serious games, information literacy training) tested with students and staff;
- **Institutional policies** on communication and science communication aimed at preventing or responding to disinformation campaigns;
- **Partnerships between universities, media organizations, associations or local authorities** to co-produce verification tools, collaborative platforms or spaces for public debate;
- **Legal or ethical experiments** governing scientific discourse in the public sphere;
- **Action research or participatory approaches** involving researchers, students and citizens around local or national scientific controversies.

Particular attention will be paid to participatory mechanisms aimed at strengthening the links between science and society: citizens' or scientific conventions, citizens' juries, hybrid forums, and public consultations on sensitive research projects. Contributions may examine, based on empirical data, the capacity of these formats to build trust, transform mutual perceptions between researchers and citizens, or influence institutional decisions.

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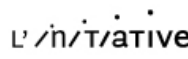
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→ SUBMIT A PAPER

To apply, please send the documents listed below to the following address: mission-democratie@univ-nantes.fr by **24th of May at 23:59**.

1. An **up-to-date CV** with a list of relevant publications and/or communications;
2. A **short biography** (max. 8 lines);
3. A **proposal for a paper** (max. 500 words);

Presentations may be submitted in **French or English** – please note, however, that **the main language of the conference will be French**.

You will be notified of the outcome of the call for papers in June.

We are planning to **publish the conference proceedings** following the event. The event will also be recorded and the videos published online on the Nantes University website.

→ FEES

Successful applicants will have **no accommodation or travel costs** to pay.

The following will be fully covered by the organizers: hotel accommodation, travel expenses (by train or by plane for journeys **that cannot be made in less than 7 hours by train**), as well as some meals during the two days of the conference.

→ SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

- ❖ **Arnaud LECLERC** - Professor of political science at Nantes University and Head of the “University Democracy” Mission
- ❖ **Émilie FRENKIEL** - Associate professor in political science at the University of Paris-Est-Créteil
- ❖ **Guillaume CUNY** - Postdoctoral researcher in education sciences within the “University Democracy” Mission at Nantes University
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- ❖ **Quentin LANDENNE** - FNRS-qualified researcher, professor at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles
- ❖ **Sandrine RUI** - Associate professor in sociology at the University of Bordeaux
- ❖ **Susanna ZELLINI** - FNRS researcher

→ CONTACT

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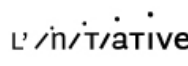
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