Bocconi

BEMACS LECTURE
ESCAPING THE CONVENIENCE OF AI-POWERED MISINFORMATION

16 MAY 2025
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Bocconi University
Aula Franceschi
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SPEAKER
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ABSTRACT

Misinformation is widely regarded as a fundamental problem for democratic societies, insofar as it undermines the very idea of rational deliberation based on shared interpretations of the available evidence. The critical impact of misinformation depends on its dissemination through digital technologies and media, and the extent to which it comes to permeate AI-powered inferential processes. I discuss the link between the spread of misinformation and the quest for "convenient" AI to automate processes of research and validation, noting the challenges raised by a technological system that privileges productivity and efficiency over reliability, and the threat this poses in turn to expectations that AI will generate trustworthy knowledge. The quest for convenient technological solutions is ever more alluring in a world that often feels hard for humans to navigate, and yet it does not necessarily result in the creation of reliable knowledge - and can in fact instigate rushed or misleading interpretations of available evidence. As an alternative to convenient models of AI-powered research, I propose an alternative framework for understanding and developing digital technologies to facilitate research, which I label 'environmental intelligence' (EI). This framework is grounded in a deep appreciation for: (1) the planetary ecology within which technology needs to operate, (2) the need to support such an ecology in the long term, and (3) the recognition that misinformation can be the outcome of misguided interpretation as easily as the spread of false facts. In closing, I discuss how such an alternative framework can spur innovation that serves the needs of a plural, unequal and divided democratic society, while also tackling the existential threat posed by the climate emergency.

SABINA LEONELLI holds the Chair of Philosophy and History of Science and Technology at the Technical University of Munich, where she is also Research Director of the Ethical Data Initiative, Co-Director of the Public Science Lab and Principal Investigator of the ERC Project PHIL_OS. Until 2024 she was the Director of the Exeter Centre for the Study of the Life Sciences at the University of Exeter, where she continues to hold a Honorary Professorship.

Her research, which includes philosophical, historical and social science methods, concerns: the role of technology and data in knowledge production, and especially how computing and digitalisation efforts are transforming research and its social dynamics and roles; and the institutionalisation of Open Science as a window on the methods, epistemology and political economy of contemporary forms of scientific inquiry, particularly in the life and environmental sciences. Her work aims to foster both understanding of these processes and strategies for intervention, including policy-facing advice, advisory roles in scientific projects and educational initiatives to support low-resourced environments and enhance responsible research practices globally.

Leonelli is an alumna of the Global Young Academy and engages with a variety of initiatives in science policy. She is also Fellow of the Stazione Zoologica of Naples, Academia Europaea, Royal Society of Biology and Académie Internationale de Philosophie de la Science; President-Elect of the International Society for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Biology; Subject Editor for the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy; Associate Editor for the Harvard Data Science Review; and recipient of the Lakatos Award 2018 and the Patrick Suppes Prize 2022. Her latest book Philosophy of Open Science (2023) was published Open Access by Cambridge University Press.

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