

Much Ado about Disinformation: A Critical Approach to Coping with Information Manipulation in a Post-Truth World

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Education must be about thinking – not training a set of specific skills.³⁶⁹

Abstract

The purpose of the study on which this article is based, was to explore how to build cadets' ability to fight against disinformation in a post-truth age. Considering lessons from the study of the human mind, invited us to examine why we fail to discern truths rather than how to win this fight. Disinformation – often interchangeably called “fake news” – seeks to shape or change perceptions of information users. The understanding of disinformation by our young leaders is crucial because it – i.e. sowing distrust and doubt among members – is dangerous and even fatal to the Army, which places great emphasis on mutual trust as its core value. The military in general and the Army in particular are expanding their information operations capabilities, as North Korea is one of the few countries that actively engage in a disinformation campaign. During their years at the military academy, cadets should however improve their ability to discern truths before acquiring skills relevant to a counter-disinformation campaign. The best way to enhance cadets' ability to discern truths – even in a media-saturated age – is still to participate in deep reading, especially reading imaginative literature that fosters inventive as well as critical thinking. The current study argued that our grasp of human frailty through deep reading helps us develop an ability to discern truths.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Deep Reading, Disinformation, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Simulacra

Introduction

In the technology-driven world today, there is a common perception that warfare is primarily about technology.³⁷⁰ My concern, however, stems from the rhetoric of this age, “technology alone”. My role as a professor of English Literature at a military academy is often questioned with questions such as –

- What are the benefits of learning literature?
- Why not teach about artificial intelligence, military robots, or drones instead of literature?

It is challenging to persuade sceptics that deep reading is an effective practice in countering disinformation, especially when literature is deemed irrelevant in the face of such challenges.

I do not dismiss the importance of our cadets learning scientific and technological knowledge, which is crucial given the pervasive influence of “information” and “technology” in our lives. Information technology literacy should however encompass more than just operating skills. It should involve hermeneutic analysis, which interprets ‘confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory’ data and information.³⁷¹ Hermeneutic analysis, involving a recursive process of interpretation, is essential for true information technology literacy. My contention is that literary literacy and information technology literacy share similarities in their objectives and the skills they develop. Both require the ability to analyse and interpret different forms of communication critically across various mediums.³⁷²

If our literature courses aim to teach cadets to think critically and fairly, then the practice of hermeneutic analysis can also be applied to countering disinformation, necessitating that cadets become critical and ethical consumers of information.³⁷³ In our post-truth milieu that perpetuates the spread of disinformation, this is a most timely issue. As a literary scholar, my curiosity and sensitivity cannot but be drawn to deep reading of literature as an efficient response to the problem of disinformation.³⁷⁴ I argue that the best and most efficient way to respond to fake or manipulated information is to equip our cadets with the awareness and ability to understand hidden meanings underneath the surface through a deep reading of Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. The study employed a presentist approach to align the insights in the play with contemporary experiences, aiming to build arguments informed by modern knowledge without equating the past with the present.³⁷⁵

Disinformation matters

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘disinformation’ – often linked to fake news – is defined as ‘false information, esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it’.³⁷⁶ Russia has long mastered disinformation for domestic and foreign policy, with the military traditionally defining it as an attempt to disrupt decisions of the enemy through deceptive information.³⁷⁷ While the term “disinformation” originated during the Cold War (1947–1991), it was not until the 2010s that concerns about disinformation campaigns expanded beyond the military to encompass all aspects of life, particularly with the rise of the internet and digital technology.³⁷⁸ Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, while facilitating information flow, are frequently sources of false information deliberately crafted to harm individuals or groups. When disinformation is conveyed through trusted sources, the damage is profound, making it crucial to address this growing issue.³⁷⁹

Countering disinformation requires a multifaceted approach; yet, discussions often focus on fact-checking and technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence

(AI) for detection and policy interventions. This, however, overlooks the fundamental battle for people's hearts and minds – to influence opinions and emotions. Countering disinformation should therefore also involve advocates of hermeneutic analysis of texts and their contexts. A 2022 *Military Times* article highlights the importance of education in countering disinformation:

Education is the simplest thing, and the most immediate thing, and the most effective thing that we can do at our level for the individual. Because at the end of the day, mis- and disinformation is only effective if the recipient is vulnerable to it.³⁸⁰

Disinformation thrives in the absence of discernment and vigilance at individual level, but responsive critical thinking can combat it. False claims by North Korea about Japan discharging radioactive water into the Pacific Ocean illustrate how education in critical and moral reasoning can counter disinformation in practice.³⁸¹

The North Korean goal is to create anti-Japanese sentiment among South Koreans, hindering military cooperation with Japan. Given the historical disputes between Korea and Japan, the public is divided on Japanese matters. While verifying the accuracy of the North Korean claims, we must practice hermeneutical analysis to filter out how false information distorts interpretation. In this regard, *Much Ado About Nothing* is enlightening, as the central issue in the play is 'interpretation'.³⁸² The play revolves around two pairs of lovers: Claudio and Hero, and Benedick and Beatrice. Claudio falls in love with Hero, and plans to marry her, but the villainous Don John deceives Claudio into believing that Hero has been unfaithful, leading to public disgrace and a faked death. Meanwhile, Benedick and Beatrice, who initially engage in witty banter and claim to disdain love, are tricked by their friends into confessing their feelings for each other. Ultimately, the truth about Hero's innocence is revealed, leading to her reunion with Claudio, and Benedick and Beatrice also marry, culminating in a joyful resolution.

In scene after scene, this Shakespeare comedy addresses the problems created by the difference between a surface-level interpretation and a deep-level interpretation of information. At the surface level, the play examines how a 'swift movement' of information can be used to shape perception, even when the information is contradictory or deceptive.³⁸³ At the deep level, the play demonstrates how disinformation spread by trusted people – especially military and political leaders – undermines their credibility and social trust. As if answering the question of why our cadets should read literature, Shakespeare confirms that achieving complete objectivity is difficult because of inherent human flaws. Essentially, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare provides us a case study, demonstrating that the only way to overcome these flaws is to think critically.

What it means to think critically

Much Ado About Nothing explores the theme of deception and the contrast between appearances and reality. Characters engage in various forms of deception, highlighting misconceptions and the consequences of disinformation. Shakespeare reflects the

conditions under which disinformation thrives. Before examining *Much Ado About Nothing* for insights into countering disinformation through critical thinking, it is essential to define critical thinking.

The term “critical” originates from the Greek word *krinein* (κρίνειν), meaning ‘to separate’, ‘to judge’, or ‘to distinguish between two or more things’.³⁸⁴ John Dewey provides a definition of critical thinking that harkens back to these Greek roots: active, persistent, careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.³⁸⁵

While Robert Ennis expands upon the meaning of critical thinking from a logical perspective so that it can comprise ‘rational reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do’.³⁸⁶ Jane Roland Martin argues from a moral perspective that reflective thinking goes beyond mere logical analysis and considers the emotional, intuitive, and contextual dimensions of ethical issues.³⁸⁷ For her, critical thinking can facilitate moral judgment by enabling individuals to reflect on moral claims, assess the consequences and implications of different actions, and weigh conflicting moral values or principles. It is however important to note that neither critical thinking nor moral consideration alone is enough for recognising our own biases and identifying gaps, inconsistencies, or manipulations in the information we encounter. As contemporary research suggests, we need to use cognitive skills actively, including ‘problem-solving, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions’, for intellectual engagement with people whose knowledge, beliefs, and political opinions vary.³⁸⁸ This active engagement is crucial for understanding diverse perspectives, fostering meaningful discussions, and developing critical thinking.³⁸⁹ In Shakespeare’s text, we can find many points of potential comparison to the contemporary military context.

Shakespeare’s characters, such as Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, often fail to implement critical thinking, making themselves vulnerable. They embody the distinction between reality and appearance, highlighting the contrast between how things appear and how they truly are. While these characters should be understood within their historical context, examining them through a twenty-first-century lens reveals new relevance, particularly regarding disinformation. *Much Ado*, more than any of Shakespeare’s plays, provides an interpretive glimpse of the conditions for the successful spread of disinformation: ambiguous information, malicious actors, and audience expectations. Consider Borachio’s plot to ruin Hero’s reputation:

BORACHIO

But know that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero’s gentlewoman, by the name of Hero. She leans me out at her mistress’ chamber window, bids me a thousand times goodnight. – I tell this tale vilely. I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio, and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.

CONRAD

And thought they Margaret was Hero?

BORACHIO

Two of them did, the Prince and Claudio. But the devil my master knew she was Margaret. And partly by his oaths, which first possessed them, partly by the dark night, which deceive them but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made – away went Claudio enraged, swore he would meet her as he was appointed next morning at the temple, and there, before the whole congregation, shame her with what he saw o'ernight, and send her home again without a husband. (3.3.142–161)³⁹⁰

This dialogue reveals that slander (a modern synonym for disinformation) relies on what the characters called 'fashioning' (3.3.134) to plant, place, and possess people's hearts and minds in order to say that seeing is believing. Carol Cook makes the centrality of 'fashion' within the play vivid by linking it with 'talking well', suggesting that rhetorically well-fashioned talking is 'defensive' and is, therefore, used to 'cover their emotional nakedness and to avoid exposure'.³⁹¹ It is telling that fashion is most dangerous to the insinuating malice of slander when it involves a purposeful presentation to create a desired image or perception. Even more telling is that Borachio calls up two aspects of fashioning disinformation: cognitive bias that reinforces sexism, and emotional bias that provokes an emotional reaction in the audience in the form of anger and a desire for revenge.

Shakespeare's figuration of influencing minds as a fashion epitomises the extent to which individual heuristics and existing biases can reinforce social division and prevent critical thinking. Claudio's anger and his desire for revenge toward Hero inscribes upon her the label of 'Dian in her orb' (4.1.57) but in reality 'more intemperate... / Than Venus' (4.1.59–60). This has something to do with the pervasive misogynist values in Messina, and reflects the community's fear of women's sexual passion.³⁹² Not surprisingly, Claudio, trapped in social conditions in which there is no room for critical thinking, accepts provided information without verification, and then seeks to make an emotional connection with the citizens of Messina, simply instilling a negative image of Hero as a 'rotten orange' (4.1.32) among their hearts and minds. The important point is that he lacks critical thinking. Claudio falls prey to the cognitive bias that reinforces his misogynistic viewpoint: 'But she is none. She knows the heat of a luxurious bed' (4.1.40–41). This idea of the social inscription of female-sexed bodies as a permanent stain is evident too in Leonato's language: 'O she is fallen / Into a pit of ink, that the wise sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again' (4.1.139–141). Throughout military culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many military texts favoured intellectual capabilities.³⁹³ The soldier-characters in this play however do not embody this ideal.

What it means to read deeply

Critical thinking is a skill that can be developed and improved with practice. Deep reading is one way to cultivate critical thinking by engaging with ambiguous or confusing texts. Deep reading contributes to the acquisition of true knowledge, and is more than merely reading for a longer period. Maryanne Wolf, an expert in reading and literacy, defines deep reading as ‘the cognitive, perceptual, and affective processes that prepare readers to apprehend, grasp, and assimilate the sense of what is read – beyond decoded information’.³⁹⁴ In other words, deep reading supports the development of critical thinking skills by identifying biases or gaps in the argument, assessing the evidence provided, and providing a rich context for understanding. Wolf’s primary interest lies in the ability to link a visual representation (image) to linguistic and conceptual information (meaning), as this is the very first step in developing critical thinking. It is crucial to recognise that images alone may not always provide the complete truth or the full context of a situation. The fact that images can be manipulated, taken out of context, or used as a form of disinformation to influence and shape the public, informs several arguments related to how we create meaning from images. The scene where Hero’s visage is read in two different ways demonstrates the subjective nature of interpreting images:

CLAUDIO Behold how like a maid she blushes here.
O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? ...
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.
(4.1.34–38; 42)

FRIAR By noting of the lady, I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes,
And in her eye there hath appeared a fire,
To burn the errors that these princes hold
Against her maiden truth.
(4.1.158–164)

Two characters interpret the same image differently based on preconceived notions and emotional states. This dramatises what Nicholas R Helms calls the ‘interpretability’ of images and how these images can shape behaviour and action.³⁹⁵ Shakespeare demonstrates how emotionally charged vocabularies, combined with images, generate specific responses and reinforce false narratives without clear evidence. This is epitomised by Friar Francis’ absolute assurance in his belief:

FRIAR Call me a fool,
Trust not my reading nor my observations,
Which with experimental seal doth warrant

The tenor of my book. Trust not my age,
 My reverence, calling, nor divinity,
 If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here
 Under some biting error.
 (4.1.164–169)

Despite these rhetorically layered statements, it cannot be denied that the friar '[relies] too heavily on intuitive, automatic judgements, and even when [he tries] to use reason, [his] logic is often lazy or flawed'.³⁹⁶ Shakespeare is not merely content to suggest that images are not always interpretable in terms of cognitive biases that let Claudio and the friar prefer one interpretation over another: Shakespeare further demonstrates how the authority and validity of sources of knowledge, such as 'reading, observations, experimental seal, and age', are challenged. The friar's words reveal that he has been trained in rigorous methods of inquiry and analysis. Ironically, however, he plays a significant role in challenging traditional sources of knowledge. Given that our post-truth world is characterised by the erosion of trust in sources of knowledge, the situation in *Much Ado* is not so different from our present predicament in relation to disinformation. Additionally, as in our time, assigning clear accountability is difficult, as demonstrated in a subsequent act. When Don John's malicious plot is finally found out, the prevalence of anonymous or pseudonymous identities obfuscates responsibility, making it challenging to hold specific individuals accountable.

FRIAR	Did I not tell you she was innocent?
LEONATO	So are the Prince and Claudio, who accused her Upon the error that you heard debated. But Margaret was in some fault for this, Although against her will, as it appears In the true course of all the question. (5.4.1–5)

Such lack of accountability for their words and actions is well captured in Antonio's remark: 'Well, I am glad that all things sorts so well' (5.4.7). We can argue that, when discussing the relevance of the play, Shakespeare's time, like our own, was filled with manipulated or misrepresented information that was readily available and easily transmitted to the public, often gaining credibility due to leaders' negligence.

Reading not images but simulacra

In a contemporary post-truth culture, the blurring of the line between fact and fiction, between emotion and reason, and between truth and lie is enormously intensified. We are therefore unable to grasp the authentic interpretation of information. Given that disinformation takes advantage of our cognitive biases and self-assurance of belief, it is a challenge to our ability to discern true information from false information. To overcome this challenge, we need to understand the nature of knowledge, and what it means to know.

Knowledge is acquired through various means. Shakespeare's characters' knowledge is however confined to sensory experiences, or observations, of the immediate moment, as exemplified in Leonato's comments about Beatrice's way of understanding the world: 'Cousin, you apprehend passing shrewdly' (2.1.78). Having said that, we know that that the term 'apprehend', implying the act of grasping, has particular relevance.

The play invites us to reflect on our contemporary epistemological currency that an individual's own belief suffices for justification. Such cognitive bias that leads to misinterpretation of information is best described in Beatrice's remark to Leonato's reproach for her disdainful attitude: 'I have a good eye, uncle; I can see a church by daylight' (2.1.79–80). Both Leonato and Beatrice exemplify the tendencies to place more trust in what is personally seen and to rely on seeing as the sole criteria for believing. In this regard, it is helpful to remember that, for the entire Western tradition, knowledge acquisition involves the concept of grasping and tends to equate such conceptual grasping with seeing.³⁹⁷ This tendency is addressed in the play when the meaning of Hero's blushes remains indeterminate. Claudio's emotional reasoning poses an important question: is seeing an objective way to validate one's interpretation? Claudio's words signal that the way we see sometimes blurs rather than clarifies, and that this kind of situation can be explained only by imaginative language:

CLAUDIO O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been
 If half thy outward graces had been placed
 About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
 But fare thee well, most foul, most fair; farewell
 Thou pure impiety and impious purity.
 (4.1.99–103)

Claudio's inability to assess evidence critically or creatively leads to his misjudgment. Shakespeare's questioning of the relation between truth and appearance remains relevant, as highlighted by Harold Bloom's remarks, 'the Friar too tends to make Hero's absence the occasion for a "moving" representation of her'.³⁹⁸ For Bloom, the friar's use of a theatrical representation that evokes strong emotions or touches the audience deeply exemplifies the power of the stage to create an alternative reality. The idea that Hero's absence becomes an opportunity to create an emotionally powerful portrayal of her however uncovers a terrifying reality where we fail to distinguish between alternative (civilian) and augmented (military) reality and reality. As we will see below, Shakespeare specifically depicts the need for meticulous awareness in being a good soldier, especially when the nature of communication shifts from text to visual images that can effectively simulate public sphere dialogues.

The 'moving representation' of Hero can be associated with Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, which refers to the idea that contemporary society is increasingly dominated by images, signs, and representations that have detached themselves from their original meanings.³⁹⁹ According to Baudrillard, simulacra have become substitutes for reality, blurring the boundaries between the real and the simulated.⁴⁰⁰ In the following scene, we can find elements that resonate with Baudrillard's ideas:

FRIAR

Let [Hero] a while be secretly kept in,
And publish it that she is dead indeed.
Maintain a mourning ostentation,
And on your family's old monument
Hang mournful epitaphs, and do all rites
That appertain unto a burial.
(4.1.203–208)

At first glance, the fashioned image of a dead Hero and some feigned shows of grief seem like simple deception. It is however important to note that, even before the slander of Hero occurred, the friar was certainly familiar with such fashioning techniques, considering his articulation of a counter-narrative to Claudio's insult. In fact, the friar's outright fashioning of Claudio is achieved by making a surface manipulation of Hero's death credible with the forged epitaph for her. It is also important to note that the friar has a good understanding of fashioning words that goes beyond simple deception:

FRIAR

When [Claudio] shall hear she died upon his words,
The'idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparelled in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,
Into the eye and prospect of his soul
Than when she lived indeed.
(4.1.223–230)

The friar's invention of Hero's virtual death exemplifies Baudrillard's ideas: the representation of dead Hero appears so vividly in Claudio's mind that it becomes more real than Hero who existed in reality. In my view, Shakespeare's awareness of simulacra – long before the invention of the modern version of the concept – is confirmed by Claudio's language. In a foregoing scene, Claudio uses Baudrillard's notion to accuse Hero of her infidelity, saying that she is but 'the sign and semblance of her honour' (4.1.33). Whereas Claudio's speech signals the division between appearance and essence, that of the friar further poses a question about how such a division can work together, contributing to the normalisation of the simulacra, which Baudrillard describes as –

The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation.⁴⁰¹

The important point is that the friar is concerned only about the success of his counsel to influence people, not about proving Hero's innocence to people. Therefore, to him, there is no difference between Hero, who is dead now, and the living Hero. In a sense, Claudio only experienced the simulation of Hero's death as real in the same way Borachio succeeded in simulating Margaret in Hero's clothes as the real Hero.

Applying these observations to disinformation, one could consider disinformation an instance of simulacra – the collapse of distinction between real and simulated. Recent examples, such as the 2022 fake video of Volodymyr Zelensky calling for surrender and the 2023 fake Pentagon explosion, highlight the challenge of discerning truth in a simulated digital world. *Much Ado* however demonstrates that self-awareness through deeper or imaginative probing is essential to fight disinformation, despite seeming ineffective at times.

Authorial Responsibility of Disinformation

The final scene in *Much Ado* – in which Hero presents herself as an object, hiding her identity behind her mask – underscores our heightened vulnerability to disinformation and the difficulty in distinguishing reality from simulacra. Upon her unmasking, Hero reconciles with Claudio:

HERO (unmasking) And when I lived I was your other wife;
And when you loved, you were my other husband.

CLAUDIO Another Hero!

HERO Nothing certainer.
One Hero died defiled, but I do live,
And surely as I live, I am a maid.
(5.4.61–66)

Claudio's exclamation 'Another Hero!' however suggests that he sees the woman as Hero's 'copy' (5.1.283) who resembles Hero identically. And Hero's reaction to him, 'Nothing certainer,' only confirms that all reality is nothing but an image; thus, unmasking becomes just another mask, substituting the living Hero for the dead Hero. According to Jacques Derrida, just as masking is not a simple act of concealment, unmasking is not a straightforward unveiling of truth.⁴⁰² For Derrida, unmasking involves questioning the presuppositions, assumptions, and hidden biases that shape our understanding of phenomena, including power dynamics, cultural norms, and ideological frameworks. It is from this Derridean deconstructive approach that we can ask a relevant question about the problematic ending of this play: Doesn't Hero enjoy such substitution by simulacra, adapting and even extending the friar's plot to die to live?

Although there have been many conjectures as to this ending, I suggest that, considering the scepticism found in the play toward fixed meanings, the scene confirms that simulacra – as habitual acts – are now being normalised within Messina's climate of disinformation. Furthermore, I would like to compare a mask to a computer screen, what Giorgio Agamben calls a 'surface on which images appear'.⁴⁰³ According to Agamben, 'the computer is constructed in such a way that readers never see the screen as such, in its materiality, because as soon as we switch it on, it fills up with characters, symbols, or images'.⁴⁰⁴ As if anticipating Agamben's notion of the material immateriality of the screen, both masking and unmasking in the final scene invoke the continual process of questioning, challenging, and reinterpreting the underlying assumptions, biases, and rhetorical strategies employed

in disinformation campaigns: while the mask screens Hero from Claudio's sight, while at the same time it displays Hero as image, another Hero.

The real problem however lies in the near impossibility of identifying a person who is responsible for the spread of disinformation and its consequences because of the decentralised nature of disinformation-making. As we encounter in *Much Ado*, anyone can habitually live in disinformation. In the concluding act, the play illustrates these difficulties related to identifying the main actor(s) in the disinformation campaign against Hero. Consider the following scene in which Ursula, one of those who distributed disinformation, takes the role of sending a true report to her audience:

URSULA It is proved my Lady Hero
 hath been falsely accused, the Prince and Claudio
 mightily abused, and Don John is the author of all,
 who is fled and gone.
 (5.2.93–96)

Consider also how Benedick, who was asked to initiate an action for Hero's defamation, responds to Ursula's report and a messenger's notice about the arrest of Don John and his return to Messina:

BENEDICK Think not on him till tomorrow. I'll devise
 Thee brave punishments for him. Strike up, pipers.
 (5.4.127–128)

Will people change their minds once they are provided with true information? Although we hear Benedick's promise to come up with a fitting retribution for Don John's evil deed, it is hard to know whether imposing punitive measures is an appropriate solution for disinformation. Don John, who is the main instigator in this disinformation campaign, remains behind the scenes until the end of the play. It is as if the true identities of the agents involved in the disinformation campaign are concealed behind a computer screen. Considering authorial responsibility, it is worth noting that the term "author" is broadly used for a 'creator, originator, instigator' who begins the process of creation – but it does not necessarily mean a concluder of it.⁴⁰⁵ Ursula therefore speaks of Don John's authorial responsibility because she knows that he does not control the direction of the plot. The role of intermediaries – almost all the characters in the play risked endangering the cohesiveness of the community (civilian) or the unit (military) – in the spread of disinformation is not always intentional or malicious. Their influence and reach however make it crucial that they foster social conditions to disseminate false information. Then, *Much Ado* can be read as a response to the effects of a quasi-post-truth culture. Shakespeare again provides us with an interpretative glimpse of the general conditions for disinformation, which are just as common in the current post-truth world. As we anticipate the challenges and potential of disinformation in military operations, we must combine data awareness with deceptive strategies to gain an advantage in our actions.

Conclusion

This reading of *Much Ado About Nothing* demonstrates that deeply attentive reading of literature develops the ability to navigate ambiguity and discern information accuracy. Such reading, focusing on the negative consequences of disinformation – reducing meaningful communication and reflection opportunities and undermining democratic values – emphasises understanding simulacra as common denominators of disinformation and their potency in public discourse. Technical or tactical approaches alone are insufficient; they fail to examine the rhetorical distortion of truth, leading to polarisation within society.

As demonstrated in the play, when individuals or groups deliberately twist the truth to promote their own interests, it can deepen the erosion of trust, a fundamental democratic value. Emphasising only the technical approach without recognising the affective potency of disinformation is a fundamental misunderstanding of our goal to educate and train leaders of character and competence. Elsewhere, my colleague and I have argued that the present effort of the Korean military aims at fostering the development of soldiers who will defend democracy by introducing the concept of the ‘democratic citizen in uniform’.⁴⁰⁶ To support this effort, the Korea Military Academy (KMA) has provided recommendations for developing three competences amongst young soldiers: reflection, sympathy, and tolerance. Similarly, the US-based Centre for Media Literacy regards the value of media literacy from the perspective of educating democratic citizens: it ‘builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy’.⁴⁰⁷ Our experiences however indicate that disinformation significantly hinders our efforts, contributing to emotional and ideological polarisation as well as social antagonism. Reading of *Much Ado* within the contemporary post-truth climate reveals real-life parallels to Hero’s case – individuals whose reputations are damaged by disinformation.

The most important part of our mission is to develop well-rounded leaders, and understanding of human nature is key. Robert J Vandenberg *et al.* highlight that information management techniques and research on information behaviour fit within our curriculum.⁴⁰⁸ It is however also worth listening to René van Woudenberg’s advice about how deep reading can enhance our ability properly not to be swayed by false information. He claims that we can prevent ‘wishful thinking, cognitive biases, fantasy, and self-deception, as well as extrasensory perception, telepathy, and clairvoyance ... from qualifying as a source of knowledge’.⁴⁰⁹ Unfortunately, due to the displacement of reading experiences by shallow engagement with digital texts, our society is losing its opportunity to nurture the ‘capacity for abstract thought, enabling us to pose and answer difficult questions, empowering our creativity and imagination, and refining our capacity for empathy’.⁴¹⁰ Cadets’ recognition that the ways words are used can affect the way we think is an essential part of my teaching. In addition, I want my cadets to learn that words (or images created by their imagination) can manipulate their gaze to focus on a particular aspect of reality. I argue that the deep reading of literature – despite its iterative process – stimulates our young leaders’ imaginations to play with and grasp the meaning of an ambiguous text, and therefore helps them discern good and bad information. This

is demonstrated by Shakespeare's dramatisation of slander in *Much Ado*, which testifies to the persistence of disinformation conditions across different time periods, and helps us understand current disinformation problems.

ENDNOTES

- ³⁶⁸ Colonel (Dr) Dong-ha Seo serves as a professor of English at the Korea Military Academy. This work was supported by the 2023 research fund of the Hwarangdae Institute (RN2023B 1014) and is based on a paper presented at the 8th International Symposium of Military Academies held in Doha, Qatar. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1407-3134>.
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