# Relevance of Discursive Strategies to Information Evaluation Practices


***Iulian Vamanu***
*University of Iowa*
*Iowa City, IA*

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**Abstract:** Recent work across disciplines has examined the current post-truth climate and various types of information disorders which have permeated the internet. Scholars have made significant progress in defining and theorizing information literacy and its various aspects, as well as in designing programs to help students acquire the relevant skills for evaluating information. Nevertheless, further exploration is needed, for example to understand the roles of criteria in information evaluation. The present study draws on scholarship in discourse and rhetoric studies to suggest how *discursive strategies*, a key concept in these convergent areas, can inform approaches to information evaluation. To illustrate this improved approach, this study explores the case of a recent piece of fake news that involves both text and image and has circulated widely as a digital flyer on social media.

**Keywords:** discursive strategies, information literacy, information evaluation, information rhetoric, disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories

## Introduction

Inaccurate information has become a widespread phenomenon in media recently. Misinformation, disinformation, or "fake news," to name a few of the most visible types of inaccurate information, are experiencing a rebirth and transformation in the times of "new technologies and internet culture" (Rid, 2020, p. 7). Their impact is detrimental to many areas of life, particularly with regard to "our ability to assess facts on their merits and to self-correct accordingly" (Rid, 2020, p. 8). Therefore, people must have access to reliable approaches for evaluating information.

Recent work across disciplines has examined the current post-truth climate and various types of information disorders,

which have permeated the internet (Calvert, 2001; Fallis, 2004, 2015; Hernon, 1995; Lynch, 2001; Piper, 2002; Rubin & Conroy, 2012; Skinner & Martin, 2000; Whitty et al., 2012). Scholars and professionals across disciplines and fields of practice have elaborated personal, legal, technical, and educational models and solutions to make sense of these phenomena and contain them (Agarwal & Alsaeedi, 2020; Auberry, 2018; Delellis & Rubin, 2020; Elmwood, 2020; Karlova & Fisher, 2013; Mathiesen, 2019; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018; Oltmann, Froehlich, & Agosto, 2018; Vamanu, 2019; Vamanu & Zak, 2022; Young, 2021). In particular, information scholars and professionals have articulated information evaluation frameworks for information literacy instruction in schools and libraries (Cullen, 2014; Elmborg, 2006; Lloyd & Talja, 2010; Mercer, 2018; Musgrove, 2021; Swanson, 2004; Walsh, 2010).

These authors have made significant progress in defining and theorizing information literacy and its various aspects, as well as in designing programs to help students acquire the relevant skills. Nevertheless, many aspects of information literacy still require further exploration. The necessary standards information users apply when evaluating information constitutes one such under-researched topic within the area of information literacy. In this respect, studies such as Russo et al. (2019), Baer and Kipnis (2020), Elmwood (2020), Fallis (2004), Mandalios (2013), and Tanner and McPhee (2015) have advanced our understanding of the best practices for evaluating information. The existing research, however, provides a useful albeit incomplete picture of information evaluation, particularly because it seldom considers its dimensions in detail. For example, this scholarship encourages information users to inquire into the purpose of a piece of information, yet stops short of providing details about procedures.

Exploring how information users can inquire into the dimensions of information evaluation, such as the purpose of information, can offer a clear picture of how information users can evaluate information proficiently. The present study contributes to this literature by proposing a new lens for evaluating information: it draws on scholarship in discourse and rhetoric studies to suggest how *discursive strategies*, a key concept in these convergent areas, can inform approaches to information evaluation. Research in discourse and rhetoric studies can help accomplish this goal since it has allowed one to understand how language functions in exercising various forms of domination and how people can emancipate themselves from these forms through self-reflection (Keller, 2012; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2006, 2009, 2014; van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). To illustrate this improved approach to information evaluation, this study explores

the case of a recent piece of fake news that involves both text and image and has circulated widely as a digital flyer on social media.

## Approach

Most approaches to information evaluation developed across disciplines propose a relatively stable set of dimensions that information users are encouraged to consider when examining information. Source, content, and purpose are items consistently present in these sets: information evaluators are encouraged to ask questions to determine the expertise and trustworthiness of information sources, the plausibility of message content, or the nature of the purpose of pieces of information. The hope is that answers to these questions will help readers acquire reliable indicators of information accuracy and, thus, become better at discerning it. In particular, a *purpose*-driven set of indicators are supposed to emerge as a result of asking such questions as: "Why was this source created?" (Berkeley); "What is the purpose of the information?" (CRAAP); "What is the motive behind [its] creation?" (Georgetown); "Why did the author or publisher make this information available?" (RADAR); "Does the information exist because someone wants to inform me, persuade me, entertain me, or sell me something?" (RADCAB); "How and why the source was created" (PROVEN); or "[A]re documents presented to persuade [the reader] to a certain point of view?" (RUSA) (See Appendix 1).

Such questions can steer information users in the right direction by suggesting which aspects of information to consider when evaluating information. However, the questions often fail to provide the kind of detailed indicators of information accuracy that the information users need: merely questioning the purpose of a piece of information does not allow them to discover useful lines of investigation. More is needed than just understanding the importance of the purpose for solid information evaluation practices. This study proposes to address precisely this gap: it draws on scholarship in discourse and rhetoric studies to propose a solution that builds on the concept of discursive strategies.

In this study, I use the term "source" to refer to either the author or the conveyor of a piece of information. Moreover, I use the term "(piece of) information" to refer to documents in both their cognitive and sensorial aspects. For instance, a flyer constitutes information both in terms of its message and the visual features, and only for methodological purposes can one separate them.

## Discursive Strategies

One way to refine inquiry into the purpose of a piece of information involves foregrounding the *discursive strategies* its authors employ to convey their points. In this context, *strategy* refers to "a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim" (Wodak, 2001, p. 73). Given that deception is constitutive of disinformation, the aim of the appropriate discursive strategies must be manipulation, a form of persuasion that violates widely accepted discursive norms. Persuasion is the act of "intentionally influencing a person so that she or he adopts, fixes or changes her or his ways of perception, attitudes to and views on persons, objects and ideas, and dispositions to behave or act in a specific way" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 69-70). As such, it is not problematic in itself, but it can become so when it takes the form of manipulation, that is, "exercise[ing] of a form of illegitimate influence by means of discourse… mak[ing] others believe or do things that are in the interest of the manipulator, and against the best interests of the manipulated" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 360).

Many discursive strategies can be involved in persuading an audience, of which four are particularly relevant to improve one's set of purpose-eliciting questions. A reader who approaches a piece of information through the lens of these discursive strategies may acquire a more refined understanding of its purpose, particularly when that purpose is or at least involves manipulation. The key premise upon which I build my argument here is that the use of certain discursive structures in a text can be reliable indicators of the presence of manipulative intent, as many scholars in discourse and rhetoric studies have shown: "although discourse structures *per se* need not be manipulative, some of these structures may be more efficient than others in the process of influencing the minds of recipients in the speaker's or writer's own interests" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 373).

First, referential or nomination strategies constitute ways in which an author constructs and represents various social actors in a piece of information. For instance, an account may include certain social actors while excluding others; it can represent the social actors as active or as passive (e.g., subjected to or benefiting from the activity of other actors); it can represent the actors as classes or as specific, identifiable persons; it can refer to them as individuals or assimilate to larger groups, for instance by treating them as "statistics" (Keller, 2012; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45; Wodak, 2001, pp. 72-3). In particular, using referential strategies that allow one to dichotomize society into radically opposed groups, such as "Us" and "Them," is more likely to be associated with manipulative intent (van Dijk, 2009, p. 111 and 2014, p. 99).

Second, predicational strategies cover how authors label the social actors identified through referential or nomination strategies; typically, they may use sets of positive or negative terms to qualify their characters or behaviors (e.g., "good guys" vs. "bad guys;" or "good" vs. "evil") (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45; van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak, 2001, pp. 72-3). In particular, certain strategies are more likely to be associated with manipulative intent, for instance, when one expresses or emphasizes information that is positive about "Us" and negative about "Them," or when one suppresses or de-emphasizes information that is positive about "Them" or negative about "Us" (van Dijk, 1998).

Third, one can consider argumentation strategies, which are the patterns of reasoning and the topoi that authors use to justify the attribution of positive or negative characteristics to social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45; Wodak, 2001, p. 73). These strategies make up what rhetorical studies call *logos*, that is, the "reasoning as it is embedded in a text, … apart from the character of the speaker or the emotional responses of the hearer or reader" (Corbett & Eberly, 2000, p. 11). In particular, three ways in which a text diverges from or disregards logical reasoning indicate manipulative intent more reliably: (a) one may use logical reasoning selectively, for instance, when one deems it can advance one's manipulative goals; (b) one may also make fallacious appeals to emotions and circumvent the need for logical reasoning; finally, (c) one may emphasize just one side of an argument and discourage audiences from considering alternative perspectives and counterarguments (Walton, 2007, pp. 110-1).

Finally, perspectivation and involvement strategies constitute the four ways in which the authors of a text position their perspective and express their and other social actors' specific involvement in the text (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 45; Wodak, 2001, p. 73). A few distinctions drawn from Goffman (1974) can help in articulating the meaning of perspectivation: (a) the "author" is the person who creates a text; (b) the text can be uttered from the author's perspective or that of another source, called "the animator"; (c) the text can have a protagonist, called "the figure," who can be the author (when authors talk about themselves), the animator, or some other person; (d) finally, the text expresses the perspective of a person, called "the principal," who can be the author, the animator, or the figure (Goffman, 1974, pp. 143–75 and 531–601). The perspectives from which authors address their audiences constitute what rhetorical studies call ethos, that is, "a constructed self, a mindful self, a public self" that the author believes is effective to convey their message to a specific audience (Corbett & Eberly, 2000, p. 10; see also Fahnestock & Secor, 2004, pp. 48-52). As far as involvement is concerned, certain discursive

strategies help disclose the emotions and attitudes so that an author can engage the audience. Rhetorical studies refer to this aspect as *pathos* (p. 10; see also Fahnestock & Secor, 2004, pp. 53-55).

## Case

To illustrate how identifying these discursive strategies and understanding their role in a text can improve our information evaluation practices, I discuss flyers, a complex type of document combining text and image and circulating in both paper-based and digital format. I focus on a recent flyer released by a social media user on Twitter, the online platform in which people can write and share 160-character messages called "tweets." The authors of this flyer appear to be the social actors responsible for the content created on a website titled, DissidentSignPosts.org (in what follows, I will refer to this website's authors as DSP). They opened an official Twitter account in August 2020 and have maintained a reliable record of disseminating COVID-19 messages since (around 2-3 times a day). Indeed, DSP can be considered a popular source in the anti-vaccination communities. Their Twitter account is followed by approximately 400 users; this does not necessarily mean that all of them trust DSP, but just that they are at least exposed to the messages DSP send. Moreover, since Twitter messages can be shared and reshared, the audience is probably significantly higher. DSP is also active on Parler and MeWe, two unregulated social media sites that attract conspiracy theory followers (Otala et al., 2021).

The flyer is titled "COVID-19 Roadmap: What is Going on and Why" and displays a roadmap detailing its authors' conception of the COVID-19 pandemic as an elaborate hoax (the flyer is available at the dissidentsignposts.org webpage). The two panels of the flyer combine text and imagery to convey its message. The twelve steps configure a full-fledged narrative. The first panel contains the first seven steps of the road map: "Create a Fake Scare to Terrify People into Compliance"; "Impose Lockdowns to Start Process of Eliminating Small Businesses"; "Impose Surveillance and the Start of a Police State"; "Impose Face Masks and Anti-Social Distancing"; "Push Genetically Modifying Covid Injections"; "Impose Digital 'Health Passports'"; and "Trigger a Series of Depopulation Waves." The second panel contains the last five steps: "Force Mandatory 'Pop Up' Covid Injections and Digital Identities"; "Trigger a Global Economic Crash"; "Impose Digital Currencies and Abolish Cash"; "Impose Universal Basic Income…with Strings Attached"; and "Arrive at the New Normal: 21st Century Communism / Fascism." Additionally, the second panel contains a

call to action and a list of websites the viewers are invited to visit and encouraged to trust. Each of these suggested pieces of action is accompanied by an image detailing the result of that action or people's reactions to it. For example, the statement "Impose Lockdowns to Start Process of Eliminating Small Businesses" is accompanied by a sign that says "CLOSED COVID-19." The call to action involves links to different websites, videos, and the imperative "Wake Up." These videos and websites claim to provide further evidence against vaccines, masks, and the COVID-19 pandemic's legitimacy.

## Analysis

The message of the flyer is encapsulated in the flyer's title, which is designed to capture viewers' attention. It reads "COVID-19 Roadmap, what is going on and why" in black font against a shiny yellow background. The word "roadmap" catches one's attention, spelled as it is in bolded capital letters. The message itself, which the viewer can grasp after following the proposed roadmap, boils down to the following storyline: the coronavirus pandemic is an elaborate hoax meant to drag the United States into a dictatorship. To enhance the credibility and acceptability of this message, the authors employ all the four discursive strategies discussed in this study.

## Referential Strategies

DSP employ three referential strategies — identification, nomination, and assimilation — to refer to the social actors who play the roles required by the flyer's narrative. Identification allows one to define individuals in terms of "what they, more or less permanently, or unavoidably, are" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42); nomination consists in representing individuals in terms of "their unique identity" (p. 40); finally, assimilation allows one to represent these social actors "as unspecified, 'anonymous' individuals or groups" (p. 37). On the one hand, DSP resorts to identification to refer to the "billionaires who run the global economy" and who form a "tiny," "global elite." However, DSP also provides a more concrete representation of this group by nominating the World Economic Forum and Bill Gates, the two social actors, one collective and one individual, whom they perceive as particularly responsible for creating the dystopian reality described by the flyer. The World Economic Forum, or WEF, is a business group composed of companies including Chevron, Alibaba Group, and PepsiCo (World Economic Forum, 2020). Since July 2002, WEF has often mentioned a so-called

"Great Reset," or alternately "The Global Redesign" — the project of a new way for governments and employers to conceive work and power in the wake of the pandemic-related crisis with its issues and changes, such as food shortages and unemployment (Anonymous, 2020). Even though the Great Reset was designed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has fueled a wide range of conspiracy theories, including the one displayed in the DSP flyer (Wecke, 2021). On the other hand, DSP employs assimilation to refer to the amorphous group of "everyone," "society," or a "global population."

## Predicational Strategies

DSP employs predicational strategies to flesh out the identities of the social actors involved in the scenario depicted in the flyer. They do so mainly by representing them through two types of ideological polarization, a strategy that involves setting "a positive representation of the ingroup" against "a negative representation of the outgroup" (van Dijk, 2016, p. 73). Referential strategies such as identification and assimilation facilitate the construction of polarizations, insofar as they allow one to refer to whole groups of people in terms of key activity and as an anonymous mass, respectively.

A first polarization opposes the outgroup of "the billionaires" (epitomized by the World Economic Forum organization and Bill Gates) to the ingroup of "everyone else." The billionaires are the dynamic actors engaged in a process of control of "everyone else," portrayed as a largely passive crowd. However, a second and less obvious polarization occurs within the amorphous group of "everyone else": it is about those who are "waking up and resisting" as opposed to those who presumably are either ignorant or not resisting. Interestingly, DSP builds this opposition through a strategy of indetermination, since the two opposite groups are highly anonymous, and one of functionalization, since the members of these two groups are represented "in terms of something they do or fail to do" (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 39, 42).

This dichotomizing of social groups in terms of "bad guys" versus "good guys" defines the modus operandi of most propaganda campaigns (Walton, 2007, pp. 112, 117) and indicates the possibility of deceitful intent. The reason this is so is that polarizations involve a reductionist view of social agency that suppresses representations of other social actors, whose agency may provide a better picture of the social, political, economic, or cultural dynamics generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect that so

many private and governmental organizations (with their complex internal tensions and dynamics) can rally around a single and problematic cause. Indeed, the dichotomizing mindset is often an indicator of an unreliable source of information.

## Argumentation Strategies

The informational content of the flyer can be represented in terms of an argument, whereby an author makes a claim and builds some sort of support for the claim. Argumentation strategies constitute the patterns of reasoning embedded in a text. The flyer's authors frame the message as a "roadmap"; they build up a certain narrative of the current pandemic, namely a communist / fascist takeover of the government coupled with a high-tech dictatorship, which will result in people being digitally tagged, genetically modified, and permanently connected to and, thus, monitored via the internet. Forced to social distance by their artificial intelligence overseers, humans will allegedly lose their freedom and possessions, while global corporations will own everything and everybody.

Reconstructing the underlying narrative structure of the flyer's message allows us to infer that its authors aim most likely to change (or reinforce) people's beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions to act regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the vaccination mandate as the official solution to it: if the audience does not share that anti-vaccination stance, DSP aims to change the audience's stance by exposing it to a coherent story in which events that may initially look disconnected turn out to be pieces of a larger plot. However, if the audience already shares the anti-vaccination ideology, the flyer can serve to reinforce their already held anti-vaccination beliefs and attitudes.

Building a simplistic yet coherent narrative to convey inaccurate information can influence "our vulnerability to overinterpretation and predilection for compact stories over raw truths," a phenomenon known as "narrative fallacy" (Taleb, 2007, p. 63). Indeed, people are most likely to believe outrageously misleading information when it is embedded in a coherent story.

The flyer displays a few argumentation strategies that ostensibly circumvent logical reasoning. First, DSP engage in motivated reasoning. This is a pattern of reasoning in which one discards evidence that contradicts one's prior ideological commitments or emotional investments in certain ideas: one's "assessment of the evidence's worth is unintentionally subordinated to [one's] preexisting motivations and preferences. In these cases, people's reasoning leads them not to adjust their

commitments in accordance with the evidence but to assess the evidence in accordance with their commitments" (Bermúdez, 2018, p. 91). Indeed, the authors of DSP present their narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic without presenting any evidence for it. They mention certain events that have occurred, such as the shutdown of smaller businesses as a by-product of lockdown and the World Economic Forum's interference. Indeed, a recent study found that 38% of the businesses they surveyed "viewed it as unlikely or only somewhat likely that they would be open as of the end of 2020" (Bartik et al., 2020). However, DSP presents untested and untestable causalities to allegedly explain the origin of these events.

Second, DSP appeals to readers' emotions, a more effective approach to changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors than exchanging rational arguments (Walton, 2007). Indeed, DSP includes several anxiogenic representations. For instance, using such words as "trigger" and "impose," and the images of David's yellow star or a bar code on someone's head is likely to evoke in the audiences the specter of a totalitarian regime of the kind that made possible the Holocaust during the Second World War.

Third, DSP's text deliberately avoids mentioning alternative perspectives (hypotheses, explanations, or theories) about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as that larger businesses were simply better equipped to weather a pandemic due to an already substantial web presence (Nichols, 2020), or that the businesses were closed to stop the virus's spread (Huddleston, 2020). In this regard, DSP practices what Herrick (2019) calls argument "repudiation," that is, dismissing an argument on fallacious grounds, rather than through reasoned discussion (Herrick, 2019). For instance, the authors may preempt appeals to those alternative and expectedly better explanations by portraying them as the products of a massive propaganda and censorship operation, hence dismissible as implausible explanations. Ironically, DSP encourages its audiences to engage in sound epistemic practices, such as "ask questions," "think for [them]selves," "do [their] own research," and "look at both sides." However, these are imperatives that the authors do not abide by themselves.

## Perspectivation Strategies

Perspectivation strategies allow authors to build certain points of view into their texts and invite audiences to identify with them. DSP maneuvers the two polarizations ("the billionaires" vs. "everyone else," and "waking up and resisting" people vs. the

ignorant others) to accomplish a powerful rhetorical effect: on the one hand, they position themselves as members of the same group as the audiences, that is, as part of the "everyone else" group affected by the billionaire's scheme; on the other hand, they use the imperative forms of the verbs "to think," "to watch," "to visit," and "to wake up" to indirectly portray themselves as independent and free-thinking agents, i.e., as part of those few who are "waking up and resisting." As a result, DSP manages to have *ethos* and *pathos* combine in a very effective way, a strategy described in Fahnestock and Secor (2004, p. 55). The authors of DSP address their audiences in the way they project their *ethos* and invite these audiences to identify with them and strive to reach the same strong epistemic status as the one suggested by those imperatives.

Part of how DSP understands resistance through "thinking" and "waking up to the plan" includes mimicking good epistemic practices, such as looking for evidence that corroborates the group's story; however, the authors guide the interested reader toward a curated range of media products they list at the bottom of the second panel of their flyer. These documents provide links to websites that make strong claims without listing possible countervailing evidence: some contend that the COVID-19 pandemic is a nonissue (e.g., evidencenotfear.com; worlddoctorsalliance.org; and worldfreedomalliance.org). Some also believe that the COVID-19 disease can be cured with alternative medication (e.g., worldfreedomalliance.org; principia-scientific.org; or mercola.org). Others believe that all the measures taken against COVID-19 are part of a governmental plan to take control over the entire global population (e.g., swprs.org; pandata.org; globalresearch.ca; off-guardian.com; and technocracy.news). The content one can read on these websites either diminishes the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic or negates it all together.

## Conclusion

This study evaluated how scholarship in discourse and rhetoric studies can help improve existing information evaluation practices; more specifically, it has examined how insights on discursive strategies can help refine our approach to articulating purpose, one of the criteria people can use for evaluating a piece of information.

Taken together, the four discursive strategies discussed in this paper help provide a few possible indicators of deceitful intent, which is likely to signal information inaccuracy. Ideological polarization is one such key indicator, as it provides a reductive representation of the social field. It builds on such referential or

nominal strategies as identification and assimilation, which allows one to posit one or two social actors as key to explaining large-scale social phenomena. Polarization is also made possible directly by other reductive strategies, such as indetermination and functionalization: they allow one to set a few social groups in opposition to one another along a specific dimension. Furthermore, certain argumentation strategies allow one to circumvent the need to provide evidence for claims: instead, one creates a coherent narrative that aims to persuade through appeal to emotion, the narrative fallacy, and argument repudiation. Finally, perspectivation strategies allow authors to project a certain desirable *ethos* and invite the audiences to strive to emulate it.

Future research may apply this framework of analysis to larger sets of flyers or other media documents that convey inaccurate information. This may allow researchers to understand better how discursive strategies are employed to accomplish manipulative goals. For instance, researchers may learn which types of ideological polarizations are more frequently used and which social actors are more likely to be invoked in narrative forms of argumentation, and what emotions are mobilized to make a message more appealing.

## Appendix

**Table 1**
*Information Evaluation Approaches*

| Information Literacy Approach | Link to Website of Origin |
|---|---|
| Berkeley | https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/evaluating-resources |
| CRAAP | https://library.csuchico.edu/help/source-or-information-good |
| Georgetown | https://library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/evaluating-internet-content |
| PROVEN | https://www.projectcora.org/assignment/proven-source-evaluation-process |
| RADAR | https://libguides.lmu.edu/aboutRADAR |
| RADCAB | https://www.radcab.com |
| RUSA | https://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/history/resources/primarysources/evaluating |

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