

Antioch University

AURA - Antioch University Repository and Archive

Antioch University Dissertations & Theses

Antioch University Dissertations and Theses

2024

Doing the Impossible: Dealing with False Beliefs

Yuliya Filippovska
Antioch University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aura.antioch.edu/etds>



Part of the [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Library and Information Science Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Filippovska, Y. (2024). Doing the Impossible: Dealing with False Beliefs. <https://aura.antioch.edu/etds/1034>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Antioch University Dissertations and Theses at AURA - Antioch University Repository and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Antioch University Dissertations & Theses by an authorized administrator of AURA - Antioch University Repository and Archive. For more information, please contact hhale@antioch.edu.

DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE: DEALING WITH FALSE BELIEFS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Yuliya Filippovska
ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0003-3311-2586

June 2024

DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE: DEALING WITH FALSE BELIEFS

This dissertation, by Yuliya Filippovska, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of the
Graduate School in Leadership & Change
Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dissertation Committee:

Christopher Voparil, PhD, Committee Chair

Jennifer Raymond, PhD, Committee Member

Nader Robert Shabahangi, PhD, Committee Member

Copyright © 2024 by Yuliya Filippovska
All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE: DEALING WITH FALSE BELIEFS

Yuliya Filippovska

Graduate School of Leadership and Change

Yellow Springs, OH

Fighting false information, propaganda, open lies, rumors, misinformation, and disinformation by attacking it directly and challenging it is the dominant strategy for dealing with false beliefs (Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021), and it is an important one.

Refuting falsity is crucial. At the same time, there are instances when fighting false information does not work (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; McIntyre, 2018; Van Bavel et al., 2021). One of the reasons is that it denies another's worldview, belief systems, and, as a result, their identity and even right to exist. Searching for alternative strategies of dealing with falsity, this study used qualitative research methodology and conducted three focus group discussions. My research findings show that identifying and framing a narrative behind falsity shifts the dynamic from facts to interaction, from fighting to beginning relationships to that narrative and potentially people who stand for it, consciously or unconsciously. It allows one to find a belief system and a worldview of the other, and to engage and interact with it. Thus, there is a shift from finding who is telling the truth or lies to providing space for various belief systems and worldviews to interact with each other. Making this shift changes the power dynamic and empowers human beings to stop being simply victims of falsity and gain agency. My research also shows that there is a high need for talent and skills to hold polarities and different narratives, allowing them to co-exist and not deny each other, facilitating unpredictable and unimaginable ways to interact with each other, and bring more flow into communication instead of distancing even further. Finding

narratives behind falsity and holding the opposite stories allow one to see falsity as not just an absolute evil, but potentially meaningful, transforming it into an opportunity for community building processes and for people to work on different narratives together before existing splits, greater distancing and polarizations grow into yet another violence and wars. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu/>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

Keywords: false information, propaganda, fake news, misinformation, disinformation, narratives, empowerment, fighting false information, facts, truth

Acknowledgements

On my PhD journey, I would like to thank my life path and dreams. If it was not meant for me, I would never be able to walk it, as it is an impossible task for an ordinary mind. Without inner, deeper, or higher, as you wish, guidance, I would not do it. The first subtle sign was back in 2016 when I hesitated to send my academic credentials for evaluation to the international services to apply for graduate schools abroad. It cost more than \$200, which is all I had, and it was a hassle to get to the place. As I was inclined to drop the idea, I decided to spin a pen, and the pen showed, “Go for it!” which I did. Sometime later, when I considered applying for the doctorate programs, I had two nightmares. The first dream was with me standing and rowing a boat, and in this boat, there was a dead mother; together, we were heading to the University of California. As I worked with this dream, I realized I would end up in the University, dead or alive. So, I had better do it when I was alive. In addition, as a new mother to my 2-month-old son in 2018, the dream also helped me to understand that dropping my identity as a mother once in a while was the way to do it, which eventually was good for my son and partner. I know they are proud of me, and they had some good times together. Another dream was about me going on a train through a bridge over the lake with mountains all around. As I woke up, it was clear to me that it was Geneva, even though I had never been there. Several years later, here I am, a Ukrainian refugee in Geneva, a mother of a 6-year-old boy, completing my PhD.

Magic, and behind it, much support. Following my dreams and dreaming (my deeper path) would not be possible without support from my family, friends, and teachers. I am so grateful to my partner and husband, Maksym Klymyshyn, the technical engineer, who encouraged me to go for my PhD when I was admitted and said that we would make it, being happy for me, seeing me as a doctor of philosophy much before I became one, and witnessing all

the challenges daily, picking up home duties, and celebrating and sometimes dancing together with our son for each significant or little milestone on this journey. I am grateful to my father, Gregory Filippovsky, the math teacher, for his love of knowledge and people, kindness, and caring for me, and to my mother, Iryna Filippovska, the engineer, who was encouraging me to be free, to grow professionally, and go for my dreams and studies, taking care of the grandson, when it was possible, and traveling with us when it was needed. I can write these lines as my mother is doing gardening with Mischa. I thank my older brother, Danil Filippovsky, who challenged me from early childhood to prepare me for this road, not for the faint-hearted. In my heart, I am grateful to my grandparents, especially grandmother Isabella Filippovska, the doctor, who always encouraged me to learn instead of doing home chores and showed me how it was to go for dreams despite the war.

Furthermore, I am indebted to all women in my family, and every girl and woman in Ukraine, for centuries, who are/were holding life. Some gave up their dreams, and some did not have a chance to fulfill them in times of war, genocide, and famine. I could feel the power of these women in my blood and body to do the impossible, no matter the circumstances. It was and is an essential driving force. Thinking of future generations of girls and women in Ukraine did not let me stop at moments when I was about to do so. In addition, even though I consider myself being part of the global scholarly network, I am also happy to contribute to the development of the Ukrainian scholarship community, which was eradicated in 1937 by the Soviet regime.

My special thanks go to my dear teachers from the Deep Democracy Institute (DDI) International, a global leadership think-tank and conflict resolution institute, my home for learning conflict resolution skills and awareness training for the last decade. My gratitude goes to Dr. Ellen Schupbach, who was with me throughout this journey from 2010 until the end, in

coach sessions, chats and conversations, and low and high moments. I remember when we co-facilitated the seminar in Cairo; Ellen was toasting me a glass of beer after news of being accepted to the Union Institute and University, while I was terrified, sitting and doubting if I could manage it—such a celebration moment supported me to go ahead. As a teacher, coach, and a dear friend, Ellen has been present with a loving heart throughout the process, much before and during my PhD studies, helping me with every difficulty, supporting me to become more of who I am, and even thriving while being in tough spots. Suffice it to say that Ellen was guiding my DDI diploma thesis, “Entangled: Interdependence between Personal and Community Development,” which was entirely devoted to my edges and difficulties connected to going for my doctorate education in Ukrainian society as a woman. E. Schupbach’s (2004) PhD thesis was particularly inspiring on my scholarly path. I thank Dr. Max Schupbach for the initial impulse to go for my PhD, for coaching sessions when life seemed to be on edge, and for conversations; his vision and insights were the beacons to me. Max inspired me with an idea about narratives behind false news and information and encouraged me to focus on my dissertation and keep it as a discipline, when life was overwhelming and especially during the last phase. Beyond that, Ellen and Max encouraged and empowered me to do one thing: follow my dreaming, always and anytime, despite all rationality and logic, which was priceless. I also thank Dr. Arnold Mindell and Dr. Amy Mindell for developing and evolving ProcessWork, the awareness-based paradigm, as it has become part of who I am and frames how I look at the world, live, and do my research.

This PhD journey would not be possible without the support from the DDI community, which has evolved into the Deep Democracy Alliance (DDA) lately, and some special people and friends: Dr. Nader Robert Shabahangi and Dr. Julia Wolfson. Nader and Julia are the dear companions and a powerful team, shoulder to shoulder, who supported me from the application

process and through the many tough spots and challenges, including funding, financial support, and the research process guidance, up to the final point of my journey. There were a lot of moments when I was about to give up, and they were right there to reach out in desperation, help me make the next step, go for several crowdfunding campaigns and raise funds, brainstorm on research, and move on. Nader and Julia were instrumental in my PhD path; without them, the journey would have been impossible, much more difficult, painful, stressful, and less enjoyable. I also thank Julia for connecting me with her friend, Dr. Claire Jankelson, who helped me with the narrative inquiry methodology and provided a keen space to brainstorm. I am also grateful to my friend, Dr. Xenia Kuleshova, who hosted me and my son in Geneva when the full-scale war in Ukraine started and who created a new home for us so that I could continue my studies. Many thanks to other amazing friends in DDA community for support, including financial, and for your interest and participation in my research.

Union Institute and University was a special place with a unique creative spirit and atmosphere. I am grateful to the Dean of the PhD Program in Interdisciplinary Studies, Dr. Jennifer Raymond, who helped me start and continue my PhD and create a plan to complete it. She was never indifferent to my difficulties and pleas, always present and willing to help, and helped me find opportunities and apply for scholarships to make this journey financially possible. I thank all and every professor whom I met at Union, Dr. Anu Mitra, Dr. Loree Miltich, Dr. Debby Flickinger, Dr. Woden Teachout, Dr. Karsten Piep, and others, my Cohort #29, students from other Cohorts, and my advisor, Dr. Diane Allerdyce for being supportive, gentle, and kind. Special thanks go to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Christopher Voparil. I am fortunate to have such a brilliant professor supervising my research, who is intellectually challenging and understanding, and who has been guiding me to make the most of my research, always remaining

optimistic about my work and all the changes along the way. A deep thank you to my PhD Committee, Dr. Christopher Voparil, Dr. Jennifer Raymond, and Dr. Nader Robert Shabahangi, for guiding me through the stages of my dissertation writing. Thanks also to Mollie Miller, the IRB Coordinator, for supporting the process of my research within the given limitations.

I thank all the scholarship possibilities that Union Institute and University provided. Any financial support made a huge difference for me. I especially thank the Ronis family, Steven Ronis, Michele Ronis, and Shira Barkoe, for a possibility of getting Dr. Deri Joy Ronis's Scholarship in Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution and obtaining financial support for my last two trimesters. The spirit of Dr. Deri Ronis and her life and work devoted to confronting the inefficacy of war and the need for collaboration between people and countries is dear to me, as I do the same. Getting to know Ronis's family is an honor.

Through COVID-19, the full-scale war in Ukraine, moving to another country, and transition from Union to Antioch University, with gratitude to the Associate Dean, Director of the PhD Program in Leadership and Change, Amy Rutstein-Riley, and her wonderful team, I am completing my PhD. It feels like an impossible journey, but it is meant for me, and I am happy about it and in awe. Despite all odds, it has become possible with immense support from family, friends, teachers, my life path, and dreaming. I celebrate this moment and thank you, dear reader, for your interest in my research and for bringing it forward with your ideas, insights, and further studies.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Importance of the Topic	7
Purpose and Potential Value of Study	10
Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation of Study	12
Research Questions	19
Research Design and Approach	23
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	26
On Terminology	26
General Attitudes Toward False News and How the Issue is Viewed, Defined, and Portrayed	29
Existing Strategies and Solutions to Address False Information	33
Key Human Factors that Drive False Information Spreading	38
Examples of Work with Narratives	45
Conclusion	49
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	51
Context of the Study	51
Research Design & Approach	54
Research Procedure.....	59
Selection Criteria: Topics and Participants	61
Focus Group Guide to Design of the Interaction Process and Analysis	63
The Role of the Researcher	68
Ethical Measures	69
Limitations of the Study.....	69

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	71
Theme #1: Finding the Narrative Behind Falsity	71
Theme #2: Falsity as Evidence of an Unresolved Dilemma.....	71
Theme #3: Human Experience and Capacity to Hold Polarities is Crucial.....	72
Data Collection	72
Sample.....	74
Data Analysis	74
Focus Group Discussions Overview	75
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions	76
Research Question #1. How Can Revealing and Understanding Narratives Behind False Claims Impact the Relationships with Diverse and Opposing Viewpoints?.....	76
Theme #1: Finding the Narrative Behind Falsity	76
Theme #2: Falsity as Evidence of an Unresolved Dilemma.....	81
Research Question #2. What Allows an Individual or a Group of People to Open up to Seemingly Impossible False Beliefs?	89
Theme #3: Human experience and capacity to hold polarities is crucial	89
Discussion	95
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION.....	103
Summary of the Study	104
Significance of Findings and Contribution.....	106
Alternative Strategies.....	109
Interpretation and Application of Findings	111
Recommendations for Future Research	114

Limitations	117
Researcher's Bias	118
Contribution to Knowledge.....	119
Conclusion	119
REFERENCES	124
APPENDIX: CONSENT FORM	132

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

False information, dis/misinformation, information manipulation, and propaganda are different names to one of the major phenomena and challenges of our times (Reyna, 2023). Examples are plenty: from family relationships between partners, children or siblings; in organizations between colleagues or leadership; and to inner politics and geopolitics like with the elections or occupation of Crimea in 2014.

Since I can remember, I have suffered from false information battles which could not be resolved—in my family, in my community, and in my country. As a little girl I had continuous fights with my older brother on who was right and wrong. In the moments when I was accused of “lying” in our common report to parents, I remember I was deeply sad, because what was a lie to my brother was true to me. And I am sure that the opposite was also true.

Many years later I started to work in the field of relationships and conflict resolution, using ProcessWork or Process-Oriented Psychology, the awareness-based paradigm and conflict resolution method for individuals, relationships and groups of people. I learned that a sole focus on determining right or wrong, truth or falsity, often was not sufficient. I experienced moments when deeper understanding of the different sides and roles enabled people to step out of never-ending battles of linear information and bring more flow of information between individuals and in groups. When this happened, there seemed to appear without fail a new understanding and resolution that brought relief not only to me, but to people around.

In 2014 Russia occupied Crimea, the territory of Ukraine, within literally 10 days, and started the war in the east, Donbas, which was a precedent leading to a full-scale war in my country on February 24, 2022. As a refugee to Switzerland with my 6-year-old boy now, I remember how I was deeply frustrated, because in 2014 the information space was mostly filled

with pro-Russian voices in Crimea. However, I was confused, since in my network and subjective reality I had many friends from Crimea who were pro-Ukrainian. It was much later when I started to investigate the topic of false information during my PhD studies that I realized I was impacted by a certain strategy. Based on data-driven research, Aral (2020) claims that the Crimean occupation was basically Russia's information operation, which was "probably the most sophisticated operation the world had ever seen" (p. 25). Aral sheds light on Russia's two-fold strategy: First, to effectively banish pro-Ukrainian voices from social media platforms using abuse reports and existing machine intelligence; and second, to spread disinformation through fake stories and extreme anti-Ukrainian views. As Aral writes, it was aimed to "control the Ukrainian national perception of the events in Crimea" (p. 28). The author contends that Russia's information war efforts aimed to frame a different reality of what happened in Crimea. As a result, "In just ten days, the region was flipped, like a light switch, from one sovereignty to another with barely a whisper" (p. 24). The author states that it was a training ground for Russia to implement its social media strategy further—to intrude into the U.S. presidential election in 2016 (Aral, 2020, p. 35).

Information war is fueling and perpetuating the war. Russia was not completely false by bringing pro-Russian voices, as they do exist in Ukraine. Similarly, Russia did not bring the split in Ukrainian society, as the split had already been there for centuries, given the historical and geopolitical reasons. But Russia used the existing split, as Riehle (2021) writes: "Russia did not create divisions in such countries as Estonia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, Czechia, and the United States, but instead exploited already existing divisions" (p. 1059). Instead, Russia picked up and amplified existing splits with extreme stories filling the information space supported by technology; as a result, it manipulated and skewed reality to drive the own agenda.

Fighting such information manipulation is crucial. Bringing facts and stories that balance one-sided and radical views in the public space is important. A lot of efforts are being done in this area so far. According to my literature review most of scholarly work is focused on fighting false news (Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021) However, fighting is but one type of strategy. If information can be corrected on the level of facts, with all sides involved coming to an agreement, it would be an ideal world. Yet, it is not always the case, and there are instances when falsities cannot be refuted with facts, and battles lead nowhere. McIntyre (2018) brings examples of how groups with fixed opinions do not believe in facts but instead select and accept only those facts that justify their ideology (p. 11). Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) mention how refuting false information can make situation even worse and how, paradoxically, fact-checking label can entrench one's disbelief, bring more attention and repetition of false news (p. 2), which can directly influence its sharing, whether a person believes it or not (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 85). Moreover, there is a social aspect to it, as McIntyre (2018) states that even the most incredible errors can be justified when others share a mistaken belief (p. 38). Kupferschmidt (2022) confirms that people are prone to share false content by seeking social validation (p. 1334). Intellect and the level of education are not necessarily factors influencing one's decision to believe or share false information. Bouygues (2019) claims that even C-suite leaders tend to choose evidence that supports their prior beliefs, even if it is mistaken or incomplete (para. 3).

Fighting false information is an important strategy, but it may not be enough long term, especially when it does not manage to stop cycling conversation and never-ending battles of who is right or wrong. Until now, I see very few examples in the public space of any sustainable alternatives. I was driven to research ways of working with false information that could bring us

beyond the current status quo battle of right and wrong, which could be devastating, and could lead to seemingly endless conflicts and even wars, as in my example above. Thus, I wanted to focus on the following question: How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?

By narratives I mean stories that carry both objective or factual and subjective or emotional information, influenced and framed by collective and personal histories, beliefs, aspirations, social norms, cultural background, and social position. These stories may reveal one's belief system and identity on an individual or a group level. Thus, narratives and their analysis can be a way to find different information, both linear and non-linear, explicit and implicit, that can bring light on what stands behind false information production and/or sharing. That, in turn, may bring more awareness, and as a result changes in perceptions, outer or inner transformations and potential solutions to existing growing split between individuals and groups that hold diverse worldviews, escalated by falsities that one side accuses of the other. It was my hypothesis, and I wanted to study if this was the case.

Relationship is a concept that has as many views as people on the planet. Both Cambridge and Collins dictionaries do not have one single definition, primarily because there are different types of relationships like family, friendship, romantic, sexual, business relationships to name a few. One thing that is common among various definitions is that relationships is a state of being connected (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., para. 1; Collins Dictionary, n.d., para. 1). In line with it, Arnold Mindell (2019) writes that relationship for him means all kinds of contact, which I interpret could be love or hate and even disconnection or war, relatively deep or shallow, physical or emotional, close or distant, one-time or long-term, in the visible world and beyond, depending on how every single person defines relationships for herself/himself. Even if two

people do not talk to each other for many years, if one considers it to be relationships, there may be a deeper connection in being disconnected or hostile to each other, and one person still can work on such relationships. In my case, I looked at relationships in a broad sense. Even if there is nobody present or alive on the other side, one still can work on relationships with a human being, soul, spirit, or nature. One of my good friends is proud to work on relationships with her father who died many years ago, saying that their relationships has improved during these years. Even if nobody is physically present on the other side, one still can work on relationships with that person or another viewpoint, find another perspective, get some insights for their changes and learning, and thus transform relationships eventually. In my research, an impact or a shift in relationships can mean a change in the perception or perspective of an individual or a group towards other viewpoints. To the view of some, it can be a minor shift that has nothing to do with relationships, but to the relationships field, changes in the attitude of one side can bring changes to the entire relationships, if not immediately, then in the long run. Such a shift in perception can be like a tiny piece of sand that can turn the whole trajectory of a giant metal ball rolling down the hill.

Talking about the definition of false claims, I understand that there are different levels and types of false information. It can be intentionally created on a macro and geopolitical level like propaganda, or it can be unintentionally spread on a micro level like false belief. These different levels and types are important to recognize. At the same time, propaganda may shape the beliefs of an individual, while their strong beliefs may drive propaganda. So, these diverse definitions may be entangled. In my research, I look at false information as a phenomenon that is happening, either on macro or micro levels, intentionally or unintentionally, as in the end of the

day it lands on the shoulders of a human being to deal with it and find ways to address it, both as an individual in one's life and as a member of global community.

My greatest dream is the world where public is used not only to demonstrate how we can battle, hate and kill each other as victims of false information and propaganda, but how we can work together to transform these battles into possible new understandings, resolutions, and possibly new relationships. In the recent Facebook post after a month of the terrible war between Israel and HAMAS, one Arab woman living in Israel, Hani (2023), mentions that there is an “absence of a public space that can contain the complexity,” which makes many people silent. In my life I want to create such spaces that can hold complexities and contradictions of life and people. This research is part of my work. My future hope is that media, both mass media and social media can build on some of these findings and integrate them into the daily work—to not only label, transfer and fight false information, but also process, deepen, and thus transform it.

My dream, my hope, and my vision are optimistic as I have learned to see that events that are happening to us, both uplifting and disturbing or even dangerous, including disease and false information, can be both horrible to fight against, and at the same time they may carry seeds for new information, solutions, and changes. This view of the world is influenced to a great extent by the ProcessWork paradigm and my teachers, with its basic tenet that “within the disturbances, mistakes, or experiences that do not go along with our intentions, lay the seeds of rich information and potential solutions to our problems” (Mindell & Mindell, n.d., p. 61). Such a belief system is greater than just a belief. It is empirical, as it is based on my personal experience in life and work with individuals and groups.

In many instances I have witnessed that events can be not only bad, but can be meaningful, no matter if they happen intentionally or not, on macro and political or micro and

personal levels. Such a view is not justifying all the atrocities that human beings create to other human beings, but it enables me to have a hope in the midst of the most impossible situations. This hope is also driven by a belief system that a lot depends on people, us, human beings and our willingness, abilities, and eldership to do so. Human beings are powerful and have everything needed to navigate the complexities and face challenges, turning them into a rich soil for personal and community growth and development, finding a new equilibrium or a ground when things shift, and using it for community building. I echo M. Schupbach's (2018) words who says,

[T]he world is polarized. We have a lot of challenges ahead of us ... At the same time, my belief is that the world has never been better prepared and has not been in a better place to deal with it ... And I am convinced that those global challenges will eventually create more cohesion and draw us together as a global community to deal with these challenges and solve them. (6:18)

Such a perspective about events that are happening in the world, and about a human being is behind my research topic, and so it operates in my thinking and writing.

As a side note, it is important to mention that I am aware that such notions as a human being, human potential, human nature, human factors, human needs, and behavior that I use in my research are complex concepts that are hard to define operationally and that defining them is not the point of this research. Moreover, my understanding is limited to my view of the world and humanity, to my personal and collective history, to my belief system that I tried to outline briefly above. I am open to multiple interpretations and viewpoints.

Importance of the Topic

Falsity is not something new, as lies are part of human nature and can be tracked back to Plato with his "noble lie," Machiavellianism and the idea that all leaders might need to lie in one way or another to achieve their ends, to the 20th century, coming hand in hand with the concepts

of “news,” “truth,” and “objectivity” (Bailey & Hsieh-Yee, 2019; Lazer et al., 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Wight, 2018). However, false news has grown to a formidable scale in the 21st century. In 2016, Collins Dictionary (n.d.) and OxfordLanguages (2016) added such new terms as “fake news” and “post-truth” (Fox, 2020; Wight, 2018). At the same time, general trust in the mass media collapsed to historic lows in 2016 (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094).

Even though there is no single definition of ‘false information’ and its various forms (Fox, 2020; Maseri et al., 2020), the information’s “underlying pathologies” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1096), including fake news, information manipulation, rumors, lies, brainwashing, deceit, spin, falsehoods, and disinformation, to name a few, are often used as synonyms (Maseri et al., 2020). Even where there are subtle differences, they are generally viewed as a threat to democracy, governance, public health, business, global politics, geopolitics, and human lives (Aral, 2020; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Fake news is defined as fabricated information, particularly in a political context, because, as a terminology, it has arisen to describe foreign interventions in U.S. politics through social media (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Moreover, politicians have used it to label news sources that do not support their positions (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1146). *Post-truth* is defined by OxfordLanguages (2016) as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (para. 2). In other words, the post-truth world is seen to have no objective truth and rather different kinds of truth—such as subjective (my truth, your truth) and intersubjective (our truth, or identity politics) truth (Wight, 2018, p. 18). Feelings turn out to be more important than facts in shaping our beliefs (McIntyre, 2018, p. xiv).

At the same time, facts are nothing more than social constructions that are no longer absolute but relative to the existing paradigm, “regime of truth” or “language game” (Wight, 2018, p. 22). The concept of alternative facts is emerging (McIntyre, 2018, p. xiv). Thus, truth is deconstructed or “eclipsed,” with a major trend to bend reality to fit one’s opinion rather than the other way around and to use the interpretation of facts in the way that best fits one’s narrative and arguments (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 5–6). Lewandowsky et al. (2017) state something similar: “An obvious hallmark of a post-truth world is that it empowers people to choose their reality, where facts and objective evidence are trumped by existing beliefs and prejudices” (p. 361). Both fake news and post-truth imply that we live in times when one’s position and opinion, however subjective, are more important than facts and that opinions of others, if different, can be considered false, however true they are.

Putting one’s opinion on par or even above facts seems to be due to the decolonization of knowledge and democratization of epistemology (Wight, 2018, p. 24). It is inherent to the post-truth times that value all kinds of knowledge, including subjective ones. In such a context the issue of false information has grown exponentially—partly due to the *Zeitgeist* of decolonization, partly due to technology and the development of social media or the “Hype Machine” (Aral, 2020, p. 22), and partly due to human and societal trends such as a tendency to form triadic closures with like-minded people (Lazer et al., 2018) and homophily or a tendency of similar people to be connected with each other according to biological or cultural features, in social networks (Asikainen et al., 2020). It is enhanced by social media and their algorithms to gain “likes” by ‘feeding’ information that aligns with people’s views or beliefs, thus forming even more closures online. In addition, the spread of false news is influenced by individual psychology to seek status or popularity (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Fox, 2020) to confirm one’s

biases and beliefs, no matter whether true or false (McIntyre, 2018; Sanchez & Dunning, 2021), to preserve one's identity as an individual or a group and defend it against information, however true it is, that may be viewed as a threat. The social dynamic of peer pressure, social conformity (McIntyre, 2018), and the nature of social media with the focus on "sharing" interferes with accuracy discernment (Epstein et al., 2023; Reyna, 2023) and influences false information spreading and thus greater exposure to false news. According to the study by Van Bavel et al. (2021), exposure is the core factor influencing false information sharing. The more people see the misinformation, the more they share it, whether they believe it or not (p. 85) and whether they see it flagged as false or not (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020).

Purpose and Potential Value of Study

The purpose of my research was to study how an individual or a group of people could open up and understand what was behind false claims of the other, unfold it and use it not to get lost in the sea of information, but instead get something meaningful out of it, gain deeper understanding and possibly built better relationships with the other who is telling or sharing false claims. I wanted to study if there was anything meaningful that false information or false news could bring to an individual, groups of people, or our global community. I wondered if there were other strategies rather than (or in addition to) fighting false information and how one could access them and use them as a resource for the own good and for the good of others, reaching collaboration beyond different worldviews and beliefs.

As a researcher I was interested to study what it took from myself and other people to not only see false information as an absolute evil, but as a potential for relationships between diverse and opposing views in the public space. Unlike most scholars I saw false information not as a disease, but as a dream that was happening to us as a humanity, so it might carry important

messages. Likewise, it might be a catalyst for social processes, highlighting and bringing to the surface the many existing splits in society for us, people to work on it together and thus create more cohesive community. Bringing this alternative view, I wanted to study how understanding the narratives or stories behind false claims could shed light on diversity of worldviews and belief systems, potentially giving clues on how different opposing views could co-exist together, even if they contradicted each other. I wanted to understand the information structure—not in the analytical way by reducing the problem into smaller solvable problems, but through the structural anthropology, discovering diverse narratives, belief systems and different ways of knowing to facilitate interaction between them, or in other words, process or recycle false information. By narratives I mean stories that reveal one's way of thinking and a worldview that is framed by lived experience, personal and collective history, cultural and contextual norms. Doing it allowed me to befriend false information and shift the focus from fighting it—to finding something meaningful, which could bring light on how to relate to individuals or groups of people who created and/or spread it, intentionally or unintentionally.

For that purpose, I used all the different terms of falsity such as false news, fake news, misinformation, disinformation, lies, rumors, propaganda, to name a few, interchangeably, often with the general term of “false information” or “false claims.” For my research it did not matter whether false information was created and shared intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, whether it was partially false or a complete blatant lie. I did not want to go into that direction and find details on what was true or false, and to which extent, or who was right or wrong, or dug into the many individual and collective reasons to explain why one created and/or spread false information to continue these battles. I did not see that this road would take me anywhere, especially when my ultimate goal was relationships and finding the ways for people to

live together on this planet earth without denying and cancelling each other. I wanted to work with “false claims” that might be true to some, but false to others. Even if one person considered a claim or an opinion to be false, no matter the psychological, social or political reasons, I took it as “real” and worked with it as a piece of information—to discover its information structure and larger patterns to understand it better. My hope was to make a little contribution to suggesting additional sustainable strategies to address “false information.”

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation of Study

While doing my literature review, I faced the fact that there were thousands of studies on false information, especially for the last 5 years. The most challenging part was identifying the right filters to find studies relevant to my interest and disclosing key patterns and gaps in existing research. Below I discuss the urgent call to action to study false news to find ways to address it. For example, Bergstrom claims that, “Studying misinformation should become a top scientific priority” on par with climate change (Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1334). A key theme or assumption in existing work is the general negative attitude towards false news that considers it to be a pathology. As a result, most strategies to deal with false news are fighting strategies. I consider whether there is a limitation in this kind of approach and strategies, especially when it comes to relationship and collaboration as a final goal. In addition, beyond the realm of facts that I do not touch in my literature review, I discover that one’s belief systems and preconceived ideas influence how information is characterized: as true if it is in line with one’s worldview, and as false if it is not in line with one’s worldview. In this case, fact-checking does not work, as labelling information as false equals denying one’s worldview or literally the other. The final finding that I consider important for my research brings light to the fact that most of existing

solutions to address false information are technological solutions. It inspires me to focus on and suggest human solutions—on their own or in combination with technological solutions.

One of the key findings in the area of false news presented by Vosoughi et al. (2018) indicates that false news travels faster, deeper, wider, and broader than facts (p. 1147), to a great extent due to its novelty and ability to raise such strong emotions as fear, surprise, and disgust. The authors also find that the critical contributor to spreading false news is human nature and not the bots (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1150). At the same time, Ruths (2019) claims that there are quite a few paradoxes and conflicting results with other studies suggesting that bots drive the diffusion of misinformation (p. 348). Ruths (2019) writes, “It is ironic that the field of research on misinformation has come to resemble the very thing it studies. What is true?” (p. 348). Indeed, different and opposing results, however true, are confusing, and it is yet to understand how to proceed. However, what most scholars unanimously agree upon is that false news is dangerous; it leads to greater political polarization, increased hate speech, cyber-attacks, lack of tolerance towards alternative views, more closure among like-minded groups, increased cynicism, apathy, extremism, and physical violence on the streets (Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020), and eventually wars. Some of the striking examples of information manipulation is connected to such events as the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the beginning of war in Ukraine, the U.S. election of Donald Trump in 2016, and Brexit in 2020 (Aral, 2020; Fox, 2020). On top of it, with the greater isolation due to Covid-19 and recent AI developments, and a growing tendency of people to live in eco-chambers and epistemic bubbles (Nguyen, 2020), excluding and discrediting, intentionally or accidentally, other and different people or views, the future perspectives on false information are frightening.

As result, many scholars make an urgent call to action to study the nature of false news and misinformation machine and promote “interdisciplinary research to reduce the spread of fake news and to address the underlying pathologies it has revealed” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1096), to find counter-measures and redesign the information ecosystem. Aral (2020) claims that we are now at the crossroads between the promise and the peril of social media (p. 47), and he invites a more “rigorous scientific understanding of how it works” (p. 36). Vosoughi et al. (2018) insist on having more research on behavioral explanations and solutions (p. 1150). Some scholars consider misinformation to become a “crisis discipline,” like climate science since it reminds a building to be on fire; with us, people do not know how to quench this fire (Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1336).

As a Ukrainian, who survived three revolutions since 1991 and eventually fled the war in Ukraine to Switzerland on February 2022 with my then 4-year-old son, I suffer from Russian propaganda and information war that has been going on for all these years (but really, for 4 centuries of Ukraine’s colonizing history in Eastern Europe), in parallel with the full-scale war for a year now. Combining my interest in information since childhood, which led me to work in the field of communications and later study journalism, and eventually get trained to work with information structures of individuals and groups as a facilitator, I find this call to action for the interdisciplinary scholars to study false news in greater depth and find ways to wrestle with it—quite compelling and challenging to devote my research to it, and make my small contribution in this area. My initial interest was to find ways how one can live, lead, and collaborate with the different other in highly complex information field, full of false news, misinformation, propaganda, in times of growing social divide and polarization, and make sense out of it instead of waging wars.

Based on my literature review, I identified four striking patterns. *The first pattern* is connected to the general attitude toward false information is primarily negative; it is portrayed as a pathology. False news and all its variations are treated as a disease, a malaise, a pathology, a disaster, an infodemic, and a tragedy of our times (Aral, 2020; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Maseri et al., 2020). As a result, nearly all strategies that address false news are aimed to detect, combat, and fight it, stop it, control or fix it, find countermeasures, and increase the resilience of information systems to misinformation campaigns (Grinberg et al., 2019; Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021). There are rare studies, mainly three, that at a certain moment suggest viewing and treating false information as normal human behavior (Fox, 2020), with rumors as a way for people to make sense of what is happening in ambiguous, uncertain, and confusing situations (Arif, 2020, p. 18), and not as an evil human trait to fight, get rid of or eliminate.

Viewing “false information” as a pathology or a disease, leads to *the second pattern*: most existing strategies to address falsity are aimed at fighting it. Attacking false news directly is a critical step, however, fighting it only is a limitation. In the long run, it is not effective and sustainable, especially when it comes down to relationships and collaboration between people. Finding who is right or wrong and who is telling the truth or lies may be important, yet it is not enough to work on and solve relationship issues. Amy Mindell (2019) writes, “Being right is only for the gods, it's not more than a fixed state. At best, it is a judgment, but it cannot replace the living, ongoing process occurring between people” (p. 18). In my case, I was interested in focusing on the aspects of relationships and collaboration in times of false information, and I did not see studies around it yet. In addition, as one of the fighting tools, fact-checking platforms do not quite work, or better say—they work to some extent, and then they can even backfire. For

example, due to the “illusory truth effect” (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 96) and the “repetition effect” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 44), the repetition of false information that is labeled as false or partially false after fact-checking can paradoxically increase attention and belief in false information (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Or, contrarily, according to “the backfire effect” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 48), flagging articles as false does not change users’ beliefs that align with their political opinions (Moravec et al., 2019) and misperceptions (Aslett et al., 2022). Moreover, if the own beliefs are labeled as wrong, there is a rejection of the evidence and even “double down” on the mistaken belief (McIntyre, 2018, p. 48). It indicates that fighting false information does not always work.

Fighting false information is not the central theme of my research, and it is not my aim. My aim was to follow false information as a phenomenon, to find meaning and alternative ways of dealing with it—to understand how we, people, can live together and collaborate in a highly complex information environment instead of waging wars.

The third pattern in existing research is the finding that one's belief system and preconceived ideas are connected to social location and play an important role in how information is viewed and characterized: true or false. Several studies show that news is considered true or false not necessarily because of its absolute truth or falsity but because it correlates with a person's belief system (Bailey & Hsieh-Yee, 2019; Mookherjee, 2019; Moravec et al., 2019; Sanchez & Dunning, 2021). Sanchez & Dunning (2021) explain that people are often threatened by information that questions beliefs and important self-aspects as individuals or groups. They claim, “[C]ontrasting beliefs can evoke threat and dissonance and, thus, must be discounted or dismissed” (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021, p. 1092) as false. So, information can be true or false based on facts. However, in addition, information can be true or false because it is in

line (or not in line) with one's worldview and belief systems. In other words, it turns out to be more about finding meaning than about identifying truth or falsity, and the role of social location and belief systems is viewed in relation to how people make meaning. James Baldwin (1985) speaks about something similar when he describes the double-bind of White folk: "White America remains unable to believe that Black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country" (p. 536). As a result, to be effective, the discussion shifts from defining true or false information to discovering values, beliefs, prejudices, worldviews, and narratives that stand beyond given information, true or false.

The above finding is crucial for my research from individual and social perspectives. It says that in addition to the level of facts, there is another level of subjective information where true and false information is relative to one's opinion, visions, or belief systems—for an individual or a group of people. These belief systems are hard to deal with, as it is nearly impossible to change or update them (Rabb et al., 2022), because they are part of one's identity or ideological worldview that people tend to treat as set or fixed. Even if these opinions are seen as false to some, they are still considered "true" for certain people who believe them. Moreover, these "false" opinions drive one's actions, that may lead to violence, wars, and other disasters of big scale. For example, there are people, including scholars, who believe that climate change is a hoax. Instead of fighting it with facts and proving that someone's subjective truth is false, which is at best impossible to do or at worst harmful to all parties involved, one way for human interventions might be to work individually and publicly with different narratives, beliefs, and worldviews that undergird false information.

Lastly, the fourth pattern that I saw in existing research was that when it came down to false information, the stakes were high on technological solutions, not human solutions. As false information has gained momentum with the development of information technology (Aral, 2020; Fox, 2020), many efforts are logically directed at using the latest technological developments and discovering technical solutions to address the issue of false information. However, technology is only one part of the equation. Maseri et al. (2020) believe that the root of cyber-propaganda and its consequences are human behavior and technology, so they look for socio-technical solutions. Their review result shows that “92% of the studies contribute to the technical approach, 6% to the social effort, and only 2% to socio-technical approaches” (p. 92940). Even though there has been more research in behavioral studies during the last 2 years to come up with human interventions, my review of existing literature still showed that a greater emphasis was done on technology than on human behavior to deal with false information.

A greater focus on technological solutions is understandable. However, false information is not only a product of technology but also of human behavior. For example, Tufekci claims social connection promotes polarisation and misinformation (Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1335). Moreover, misinformation is seen by some as a symptom of the “real disease” of polarisation, political system, and societal climate (Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1336). To a certain degree, it is easier to place responsibility for misinformation on technology than to work on the own belief systems, prejudices, biases, and social divides. However, I believe that breakthroughs may lie in the area of human interventions, with technology playing an important role but not necessarily the main one. After all, hatred, division, polarization, and violence are not created by false news but are produced by human beings, with false news possibly mirroring and amplifying human and social processes for us to address them. I saw there was a gap in existing studies on

empowering human beings to come up with human solutions to the issue of false information and how one could deal with it.

Research Questions

In my research, I wanted to address all the four gaps that I outlined above: bring a different view on false information; work on an alternative to fighting strategies; discover ways to deal with underlying information structure and narratives (including belief systems and worldviews) in the public space; and empower human beings to deal with false information, working on human solutions in addition and potentially in combination with technological ones. In my research I wanted to look at false information as something meaningful—especially in situations when fact-checking approach did not work. In other words, I wanted to see how false information was not just the evil of our times, and how addressing and understanding narratives and different levels of reality could potentially turn it into a valuable resource for one’s learning, growth, better relationships and community building processes. My research question was: *How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?* With my research I wanted to suggest an alternative, or better said, an additional response to false information. Like rumors, I consider false information to be a piece of marginalized (unpopular, taboo, too personal, or other) information, to give it a space and decipher its structure, and by way of doing it—to bring more flow into communication in one’s life and public space, making false information less of a monster, and befriend it. In addition, I wanted to frame that the world was not black and white, true and false, but there was a more complex structure—to be discovered, understood and facilitated to come up with creative solutions of different worldviews to co-exist together.

Contrary to the main thought from the literature review that false information is dangerous as it influences greater political polarisation, increases hate speech, cynicism, cyber-attacks, and as a result contributes to street riots, violence on the streets and wars (Aral, 2020; Maseri et al., 2020), I wanted to see how addressing and processing false information could potentially lead to less violence and more understanding. As the key existing strategies of dealing with false information were aimed at fighting it, I imagined that false information looked for the ways to reach out to us, people, and chased us, if not online, then on the streets, if not peacefully, then in the form of violence, to be seen, acknowledged, understood, included and addressed.

As I work on my research, I also wanted to keep an eye on the question of *what allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?* It is a sub-question to my research question above, and I think it is a crucial one, because I believe it is next to impossible to reveal and understand different narratives behind false claims unless an individual or a group of people or a facilitator, or at least someone in a group or relationships can become open to do so. Knowing that there are different connotations, by “the other” I mean an individual or a group of people, who holds different, opposing, contradictory, and/or false claims.

Generally speaking, I am not against fighting false news, and consider it to be an important phase, especially if it works. However, in the end, it may not work well in the area of relationships and community building, because fighting means there is a happy end with a hero or a winner. Yet, in relationships there is no winners and losers, if one wins another wins too, or if one loses, another loses too in the long run (Arnold Mindell, 2019. p. 18). What matters to me, though, is to find out how we can take relatively true and false claims that carry

different/opposing information (or narratives and belief systems) in an increasingly polarized world and greater isolation, and instead of denying the other or considering the other to be false or incorrect or oversimplified—open up to it, find its meaning, learn, relate, and collaborate with each other.

To support and validate this direction, Deb Roy (personal communication, January 4, 2021) wrote,

I think there is too much focus on trying to combat misinformation in a confrontational manner (unwinnable) versus developing ways to make sense of why patterns of misinformation develop and provide a basis for facilitated dialogue that perhaps is best focused not on the misinformation but other areas where fruitful connections could be nurtured.

In my case, I wanted to shift the focus from finding who was right or wrong, who was telling truth or falsity—to identifying different narratives and belief systems, and facilitating interaction between them. Connecting or integrating different belief systems was not the goal, but there was a hope that these different belief systems could engage and interact with each other, which might allow the information system to flow and social processes to evolve rather than getting stuck.

As an example of my direction, I wanted to take an openly blatant lie, for example, of the Russian Federation and its president who invented the history of Rus and imagined that the Rus had to be reunited again, signifying that Ukraine had no right to exist as it was part of Rus. In his lecture, Snyder (2022) calls it a miraculous thinking while Åslund brands the essay “a masterclass in disinformation” (Dickinson, 2021, para. 6), as Rus has nothing to do with the territory of modern Russia. However, bringing counter-facts did not change the dynamic, as this story still drives and justifies the brutal large-scale invasion in 21st century and the killing of thousands of Ukrainian people. In an attempt to find the underlying narratives and belief systems of such a falsity, I found some answers in Riehle’s (2021) paper and McFaul’s (2022) lecture at

Stanford. Riehle (2021) is saying that Russia, with its disinformation campaigns, is not capable of destroying a democratic society, and society can do it only to itself (p. 1057). He claims that what Russia does is it uses existing splits in society and uses narratives that either resonate or align with local divisive messaging—in Ukraine, E.U., U.S., and the world. It reminds me of Russia’s very nature that mines natural resources by finding a crack in the earth. So, Russia uses existing divisions to possibly shake or ruin society in their view, as there is a belief system underneath: “unanimity is strength and division is weakness” (p. 1060). This belief system clashes with the other democratic belief system, which considers different viewpoints as strength. Riehle (2021) writes, “what Putin does not, and cannot, understand, is that democratic societies are built on a foundation of different opinions and that a diversity of views based on the will of people is strong, while forces unanimity is weakness” (p. 1060). McFaul (2022) supports this claim by sharing that one of the key drivers of the war in Ukraine is what happens domestically in Russia and on its borders for the last 20 years, stating that Russia’s actions are driven by fear of democratic expansion, not NATO expansion. Thus, there is a clash of different worldviews and belief systems: one says that unanimity is strength and division is weakness, and another says that diversity is strength and one way of thinking is weakness. On the levels of narratives and belief systems—there is no one that is true or false, these are different worldviews, which both have the right to exist. Like yin and yang, in the democratic society there are moments when unanimity is crucial, and in authoritarian society there are moments when different opinions exist—visibly or invisibly. The next step might be to facilitate interaction between these two worldviews to raise awareness and potentially come up with creative resolutions. One of my hypotheses was that understanding the narrative behind false information and processing it could change the attitude towards false information and towards

the other who produced or shared it in a particular context, while including and integrating the information or the message that lied behind false claim.

Given the example above, one way to deal with false news is to fight it and stop it, which is crucial. If it works, and processes move forward, it is the best way. At the same time, if the level of facts no longer works, there may be some other ways. Another way of “fighting” false information that, for example, is meant to intensify an existing split in a society, is collectively as a group or a nation to work on this split, and process the interaction between different opinions and worldviews, thus removing a ground for disinformation campaigns to fly and make any negative impact. Instead, a society that becomes aware and knows its diversity, can be more resilient to falsity.

Research Design and Approach

My primary research questions for this study were:

1. How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?
2. What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?

In order to answer these questions, I wanted to run three focus groups online, on Zoom, on the topics that contain false information, false claims, lies, one-sidedness or narrow-mindedness and thus false for one of the sides, which might or might not be physically present during discussions. Two focus group discussions were held on a group level, recruiting participants from the global community; and the third group focused on the relationship work between two people in the middle, with possible comments and/or a discussion from the observer(s). So, my research covered the topics around falsity on the group and individual relationship levels. In each

of the focus groups there was a choice of several topics connected to false claims, and each group decided what specifically to work on at the moment. Preparing it, I was thinking of an example, and imagined that one of the focus group's topics might be around a claim that "all Ukrainians are Nazis," which justified the war that Russia was waging on my land. Such a claim was difficult and false to me as a Ukrainian, yet it was true to the majority of Russian people. The definition of "false" might be based on factual reality, or on one's subjective perception, so, it could also be an opinion or a belief that was general, inflexible, fixed and rigid, overstated, exaggerated, radical, or incomplete, where facts and persuasion did not quite work.

As a container for collecting data, I wanted to use qualitative focus group research method, which allowed to collect data through group interaction, as "it locates the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data" (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). In addition, it acknowledges the active role of a researcher in creating the group discussions for data collection purposes, which is important as I wanted to not only organize, but also co-facilitate discussions of focus groups. It meant that sometimes I could also bring a voice or a story of one of the sides as a human being, to deepen it and bring its essence, and my personal history and cultural background, however biased it was, could serve the process of interaction and data generation. After all, as Shaw (2017) states, that during a research process, "participants come to know and see us as people in relation with them" (p. 212).

As a researcher I planned to take an active role in my research, using my subjectivity and biases as part of the research process, viewing myself as part of the field, with the field impacting me, and me impacting the field too. Field is a term that refers to space and context where experience takes place (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Clandinin (2013) introduces narrative beginnings as an essential part of a research process, because personal, social and political

contexts shape our understandings and are important component of finals research texts (p. 55). It is when a researcher demonstrates the integrity of his/her research by including autobiographical information that situates him/her within the research (Shaw, 2017, p. 210). So, I planned to make a short autobiographical note in the beginning and as I did the research and in my final text I “storied myself” in relation to the topics, participants, and literature. To do so, I kept my research journal, and did my innerwork as I encountered false claims myself and found my own reactions in my social known identity of a Ukrainian woman fleeing the war in Ukraine. I brought my preliminary, however incorrect, analysis of narratives, to serve as a basis to prepare for the interaction between individuals and groups, had my subjective experience being part of the process, doing interventions and measuring them along with explicit and implicit feedback from the participants. I considered my individual work to be an essential part of the research, and potentially the leading process to help me answer my sub-question on what allowed one to open up to the seemingly impossible false beliefs of others.

In the post-truth era, I believe that without bringing the self, however subjective and contextual, with personal history and experiences, my research is not complete and not possible to do. If I understand inner tendencies and forces, I can better understand and work with outer tendencies and forces, as I am part of the greater informational field. In fact, I hypothesize that some polarities that seem impossible to reconcile out in the world, one can find and work on inside the self—not to appease or integrate, but engage and interact and thus find the ways on how different worldviews can co-exist together—in one human being, community, society, and the world. Such innerwork could have some clues and insights for the outer work and my experimental research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature review, I critically analyzed existing research in three areas: (a) General attitudes toward false news and how the issue is defined and portrayed, (b) existing strategies and solutions to address false information, and (c) key human factors that drive false information spreading. In addition, I looked for examples of what was being done in working with different (and opposing) stories and narratives in the public domain. Below I list some findings and gaps that I saw in each area.

To give a brief overview, the key findings and gaps that I present here are the following: (a) false information is mainly seen as pathology, with black and white colors, while there is no research that sees false information as potentially meaningful and discovers its complexity; (b) as a result, most strategies to deal with false news are aimed at fighting it, while I consider fighting is but one strategy that is quite limited when it comes down to relationships and collaboration; (c) beyond the levels of facts, there is another, subjective level, with one's belief systems being the core factor in identifying, creating and spreading false information, so that information may be true if it is in line with one's belief systems and false if it is not; the limitation of this finding lies in the area of applicability, I have not seen any practical way of working on finding core belief systems in relation to false news; and (d) as of now most solutions to address false information are technological, while I wish to explore the extent to which human interventions may be the main ones, or an inevitable part for technological solutions.

On Terminology

As noted in Chapter I, there is no single definition of false news or false information. Most researchers agree that misinformation is false or misleading information, and disinformation is false information purposely spread to deceive people (Lazer et al., 2018;

Vosoughi et al., 2018). Also, “fake news” is defined as fabricated information (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1096), particularly in a political context, because as a terminology, it has arisen to describe “foreign interventions in U.S. politics through social media” (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1146). Maseri et al. (2020) confirm that no generally agreed definition exists for information manipulation. As a result, they suggest viewing propaganda, misinformation, fake news, and rumors as synonyms (p. 92929). Indeed, there are different variations of false information, including lies, brainwashing, deceit, spin, and falsehoods, but also publicity, public relations, information research, information management, and perception management, to name a few (Fox, 2020, p. 174). Fox (2020) writes:

The use of the term “fake news” highlights one of the central dilemmas for the scholar of propaganda: that of definition. It has always been a challenge to define a phenomenon that is, by its very nature, fluid, dynamic and mutable. There are over one hundred distinct definitions of propaganda in scholarly literature, each subtly different but of the same genus. Each serves to sharpen our understanding in small and incremental ways. That we have not yet settled on a singular definition is perhaps a testament to propaganda’s refusal to be artificially contained or to its ability to morph. There is much in the veteran political scientist Leonard Doob’s conclusion that a clear-cut definition of propaganda is neither possible nor desirable, a decision he reached at the end of a long career in pursuit of that elusive definitive descriptor. (p. 174)

The above point of Fox (2020) sheds light on the elusive nature of false information, which can be viewed as an emerging and ever-evolving phenomenon that appears in many variations, each time anew. For example, one of the key findings in the area of false news presented by Vosoughi et al. (2018) indicates that false news travels faster, deeper, wider, and broader (p. 1147), to a great extent due to its novelty and ability to raise such strong emotions as fear, surprise, and disgust. The authors also find that the critical contributor to spreading false news is human nature and not the bots (p. 1150). At the same time, Ruths (2019) claims that there are quite a few paradoxes and conflicting results with other studies suggesting that bots drive the diffusion of

misinformation (p. 348). Ruths (2019) writes, “It is ironic that the field of research on misinformation has come to resemble the very thing it studies. What is true?” (p. 348).

The opposing findings above point to the direction that false information is not uniform; it can be different. What I see missing in the above studies is the characteristic and the content of false news that travels faster vs. slower—to understand why it does so—in a particular time and context. In this case, it is not about generalizing but about being more precise about what kind of false (or true) information it is so that one can pick up the message and understand why it is a “hot” topic that travels fast and deep, or why it is not resonating so much, thus uncovering the story behind it. For example, my hypothesis is that beyond the fact of being novel (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1147), certain false information travels fast—because it touches the forbidden or unpopular topic, or a hidden aspect in society, with false news giving a chance for these stories that may have been underrepresented for a while—to come out and potentially create splits in society so that the latter can touch it and work on it. Like it is in the case with Jane Addams’s analysis of the “Devil-Baby” story, when women see false news as a true channel to bring their stories that for a long time were silenced (Addams, 1916, p. 395). I do not see any research doing it yet.

To some extent, the lack of a “clear-cut definition” (Fox, 2020, p. 174) of false information invites us to look deeper into the essence and the spirit that animates false news in a given time, location, and context rather than focus on the outer form and its variations of expression. It leads beyond one’s judgment of what is true and false. It encourages one to look behind lies and falsity and discover the belief systems and/or narratives that stand behind falsity to understand and even appreciate it—to find ways to interact with it.

For simplicity in my literature review and research, I used the term “false news” or “false information,” indicating all the many forms of misinformation and disinformation, propaganda, lies, and rumors, to name a few. My focus was not on monitoring what was true or false but on understanding this phenomenon that had a complex structure that manifested in different shapes and forms—to suggest ways on how human beings could navigate the highly complex information system.

General Attitudes Toward False News and How the Issue is Viewed, Defined, and Portrayed

In the first section of my literature review, I looked at how false news was seen and portrayed, and arrived at the major conclusion that false news was mostly depicted as a bigger-than-human force that was dangerous to democracy, our health, our lives, and our planet. False news is also majorly viewed as a pathology. Such a perspective is important, as it makes a strong wake-up call to action. Yet such a perspective is one-sided and limited. Because it presents false news as an ultimate evil which is nearly impossible to approach and deal with for us human beings, it creates a judgmental view. It produces a desire to fight and fix it before trying to understand it with an open mind and befriend it, making it more accessible and possible to deal with.

In most studies, false news is portrayed as a major threat to democracy, public health, business, politics, geopolitics, and humanity that is growing in scale due to social technology developments. False news is seen to promote “hate speech, racism, and the degradation of discourse” and makes a “corrosive impact on our democracies and our elections” (Aral, 2020, p. 45; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Some striking examples are the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the U.S.

elections in 2016, and Brexit in 2020. Beyond that, the latest findings indicate that the future prospects are seen to be grim (Meyer, 2018, para. 1). Aral (2020) writes, “We’ve seen an explosion of fake news, hate speech, market-destroying false tweets, genocidal violence against minority groups, resurgent disease outbreaks, foreign interventions in democratic elections, and dramatic breaches of privacy” (p. 35). There has been a rise of propaganda (by 150%) for the past 2 years, according to the Computational Propaganda Research Project, greater political polarisation, and as a result—increased hate speech, cynicism, cyber-attacks, street riots, threats, extremism, instances of violence on the streets, and wars (Maseri et al., 2020, p. 92930).

Even though I agreed that the issue of false news is urgent and should become a top scientific priority like climate change (Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1334), I saw that there was a gap in how the issue was viewed, framed, and presented. Namely, false news is viewed as a growing monster, and there is a projection of human problems (and responsibility) that have existed in our society for ages—onto false news and modern technology. After all, increased hatred, polarization, social divide, and violence on the streets are produced by human beings. In addition, I did not find any research studying whether social dynamic for the last several decades contributed to creating a ground for false news to sprout or whether it was false news that impacted social dynamics. Lazer et al. (2018) claim that the trends for the last 40 years create a context where fake news can attract a mass audience (p. 1095). Among these trends are: reduced cross-cutting political interaction, homogeneous social networks and the rise of dislike of the “other,” decrease of tolerance for alternative views, greater polarization, more likelihood of accepting ideologically compatible news, and increased closure to new information (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1095). Tufekci states, “Social connection is ingroup/outgroup, that promotes polarization and tribalism as well as exaggeration and misinformation” (as cited by

Kupferschmidt, 2022, p. 1335). In other words, Lazer et al. and Tufeksi say that misinformation is a product of human processes. Other studies indirectly state that false news impacts social processes and collective human behavior. While both could be true, as it could become an alchemical process by now, I saw that false news might be viewed not only as evil per se that dramatically changed society to the worst but also as a catalyst of existing social processes—to bring them more on the surface, by way of amplifying, so that we could work on it together as a global community.

To support the above view, Riehle (2021) states that Russia and its disinformation campaigns are “not capable of destroying a democratic society; the society can only do that to itself” (p. 1057). Such a statement indicates that false news is not an ultimate evil that is so almighty as it may be depicted. I also found it empowering for me to hear that disinformation could not destroy a democratic society because it gave hope, responsibility, and power back to people for social processes that were happening; it highlighted the human ability to work it out. One may argue that Russian disinformation campaign had an impact on the 2016 Presidential election in the U.S., and the lies spread on Fox News about Trump winning the 2020 election played a role in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Still, in this case Riehle’s argument works, as it is not the false news that splits the U.S. society, the split already existed, and Russia as well as some other actors, wanted to use it for the own advantage to promote a particular agenda. But it failed, primarily because the U.S. society, however split, is more cohesive to withstand the influence of false information.

In my review of existing literature, I was still looking for so much hope and instead felt heavy from the present situation and outlined perspectives. After all, false information is quite a complex challenge with no one solution for us humans to accept it. There was a difference

between the attitude of concern, fear, and worry toward the growing danger of false news, which may be paralyzing at times, and the attitude of hope, which I rarely saw in existing research. The difference may be subtle, but it can affect the whole research atmosphere and impact its results: from being desperate and trying to save humankind from false news to having interest and curiosity to understand and tackle a complex challenge with no simple solution. I aimed to approach my research with such an attitude, intending to answer what seemed to be right in what was happening and what we could do about it.

In addition to the above, most studies consider false news as a pathology (Fox, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018), a disorder, “the post-truth malaise” (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, p. 363), a “tragedy” (Rini, 2017, p. 44), an infodemic with those who produce or share it, intentionally or not, demonstrating “democratically dysfunctional behavior” (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020, p. 9). Nearly all studies start with striking facts on how false news negatively impacts people’s thinking and brings the worst: from “potentially devastating consequences on the topics of governance or public health” (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020, p. 2) to reshaping of our lives and organizations, politics and geopolitics, eventually disrupting our democracy (Aral, 2020).

Thus, in most cases, false news is seen as an abnormality, a disease to be cured or overcome. Such an attitude is limited, to my mind. In parallel with allopathic medicine and viruses, such a view naturally produces fighting strategies. Besides, it creates a judgmental view and thus shifts the focus from understanding the phenomenon or a “disease”—to fix it. So, the idea that false news is a pathology is one-sided. Among the many studies, I found only two researchers who considered misinformation spreading, intentional and unintentional, as normal human behavior. Fox (2020) mentions that “rumor is that we all do it—and we all do it for a reason” (p. 183), while Arif (2020) supports this view as he treats rumors as a way for people to

make sense of what is happening in ambiguous, uncertain, and confusing situations (p. 18), rather than considering it as an evil human trait to fight or eliminate.

Existing Strategies and Solutions to Address False Information

Looking at existing strategies to address false news, I realized that most strategies aimed to fight it. It stems from the first section of the literature review: It is a natural human behavior to want to fight something that is evil and pathological. Even though I appreciated fighting as a phase, in the long run, such strategies were ineffective, especially regarding relationships and collaboration. Arnold Mindell (2017) suggests that fighting is an important phase, however, it is impossible to build sustainable relationships and creative community while operating from that phase (p. 7). Besides, there are big stakes in technological solutions to deal with false information creation and spreading rather than human solutions. Understandably, technology plays an important role in the issue. However, more research needs to be done in the area of human interventions to address the issue.

As a result of seeing false information as pathology in the first section of the literature review, most existing strategies to deal with false news are aimed at detecting and fighting it. For example, there are efforts to combat propaganda and stop fake news, fix and control it (Maseri et al., 2020), find countermeasures, develop government regulation (even at the risk of potential censorship), introduce platform policies, and make self-regulation efforts like delivering corrective information and foster an equal balance of voices in social media—to “enhance the resiliency of information systems to misinformation campaigns” (Grinberg et al., 2019, p. 377). Other fighting strategies include the ways to empower individuals through fact-checking platforms (which are proven to be not wholly effective)—to evaluate fake news, raise the level of

individual responsibility in how one uses social media, increase media literacy, and prevent exposure of people to fake news (Lazer et al., 2018; Van Bavel et al., 2021), to name a few.

All the above fighting strategies are necessary, as fighting is an important phase. It is needed, as it addresses the issue at hand and allows people to feel the power to face and deal with false news instead of letting it overcome and eventually defeat us. However, the fighting strategies work to some extent, and then they reach their limitation, especially regarding relationships and collaboration. The idea of fighting is built on “win-lose” logic. At the same time, there is no winner or loser in relationships because, in the long run, if one wins, the other wins too; and if one loses, the other loses too, even if it may look like there is a short-term victory. It is due to the power of entanglement (Arnold Mindell, 2019, p. 18). Talking about winning and losing in relationships, Arnold Mindell (2019) writes:

The conviction that you are wrong or right has nothing to do with the relationships because you could be unfailingly right, you could prove yourself in the highest court in the land, you could show a jury that you are smarter, more intelligent, and more conscious than your partner, and yet you would still have little or no relationship to your partner. Being right is only for the gods, it's not more than a fixed state. At best, it is a judgment, but it cannot replace the living, ongoing process occurring between people. (p. 18)

Hence, as most existing strategies were focused on fighting false news, fixing, controlling, and stopping it, I did not see studies that aimed to befriend false information, and approach it with openness and curiosity, trying not only to see it as a threat and danger, but as potentially meaningful, containing gifts for an individual or a group or our society overall. After all, researching the topic with the attitude of fighting it, does not allow one to discover its secrets.

In addition to the general focus on fighting, many existing strategies are based on technological solutions. It is understandable since false information spreading has gained momentum with the development of information technology (Aral, 2020; Fox, 2020). So, technology plays an important role and can be part of the solution. However, technology is only

one part of the equation. Maseri et al. (2020) believe that the root of cyber-propaganda and its consequences are human behavior and technology, so they look for socio-technical solutions. Their review result shows that “92% of the studies contribute to the technical approach, 6% to the social effort, and only 2% to socio-technical approaches” (p. 92940). Even though there has been more research in behavioral studies during the last 2 years to come up with human interventions, my review of existing literature still shows that a greater emphasis and hope is done on technology than on human behavior to deal with false information.

At the same time, the technical side of the matter is overrated, while the human side is underestimated. It may be easier to place the responsibility of human beings onto technology, but it moves the power of solving this issue away from people, assuming that technology will be the ultimate pill to solve significant issues, which is not the case. Technology alone cannot solve the issue of spreading false information. For example, Vosoughi et al. (2018) conclude that the key reason for spreading false news is not bots but human nature (p. 1150). To support this claim, Van Bavel et al. (2021) present a model that says that each individual who shares misinformation contributes to greater exposure to misinformation, which, in turn, is the core factor influencing its sharing, whether a person believes it or not (p. 85). In addition, Westney’s (2020) study proves that the power of every individual user in social media should not be underestimated. Two key factors influence one’s decision-making in social media: (a) trustworthiness towards people who share information, and (b) credibility of this information (p. 60). In other words, there are two elements of the equation: people and content/technology that impact people’s behavior and decisions on spreading false news further. Rini (2017) supports this thought by suggesting that “[P]eople believe fake news because they acquire it through social media sharing,

which is a peculiar sort of testimony” (p. 43). In my research topic, the human side of the issue was as important, if not more, as the technical side.

For example, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) shed light on how fact-checking endeavors like labeling fake content or other “external cues” and “debunking strategies” (p. 3) are crucial but not enough to fight misinformation. The team mentions four reasons from other studies explaining why it does not always work. First, corrections may reduce but not eliminate the influence of false news. Second, some content that is not checked could be perceived as true. Third, paradoxically, repeating false information or a common myth after fact-checking can backfire and increase attention to it. Finally, the team cites one study by Chadwick et al. (2018) that suggests that users tend to share “exaggerated” content (17.1%) and “made up” news (8.9%), which is quite a significant number (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020, p. 2). Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) discover that “this is an almost unstudied problem” (p. 9), and there are intentional and unintentional false news-sharing behaviors that technology alone cannot solve. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) support the above claim by saying that correcting false claims challenges people’s worldviews. As a result, belief in false information “may ironically increase” (p. 355). Moravec et al. (2019) find that flagging articles as false triggers more cognitive activity in readers; still, it does not change users’ beliefs that align with their political opinions (p. 1343). Van Bavel et al. (2021) explain that fact-checking technical solutions does not work drawing from the “illusory truth effect” from cognitive science, when statements that are seen repeatedly are more likely to be treated as true, regardless of whether they are true or false (p. 96).

Technology is not a panacea. In Bohm’s (2004) *On Dialogue* preface, Peter Senge writes, “[T]he modern world is full of increasingly stunning technological advances and an increasing inability to live together” (para. 15). In the foreword of *Sitting in the Fire*, Arnold Mindell

(2014) writes, “Behind the world’s most difficult problems are people—groups of people who do not get along together” (p. 1). Indeed, technology is here to assist and to show the direction for us, human beings, to focus our attention and future efforts. However, the core work on human relations is to be done by and among human beings. Thus, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) scholars who apply machine learning algorithms to study the nature of false news conclude that human behavior contributes to the dynamic of how false and true news travel, and they invite more systematic analyses in the future, including behavioral interventions, to understand how to deal with misinformation and false news in our times.

Moreover, among others, Gebru, the leader in AI ethics research, states that technology can contain human biases. As an example, she shows that facial recognition developed in Google is less accurate at identifying women and people of color, “which means its use can end up discriminating against them” (Hao, 2020, para. 2). So, as it turns out, technological solutions may have the same human biases. Eventually, the question comes down to how well we, human beings, can work with our own biases and how we can understand our behavior and change.

However, working on technical solutions might be easier than working on the own biases. So, I suspect that one of the reasons that such a high percentage (92%) of attention goes to discovering technical solutions (Maseri et al., 2020) is the human tendency to avoid focusing on oneself and relationships with others. After all, working with the own belief systems, habits, biases, groupthink, relationship problems, and conflicts, and meeting the other is one of the most demanding jobs to do. Easier would be to delegate this task to technology. Fox (2020) states, “Becoming aware of our own biases and then curtailing them is surprisingly difficult, especially if those biases are deeply lodged or fundamental to our identities in some way” (p. 180). To sum

up, I saw that along with technical efforts, there was great potential in researching human interventions to deal with false news creation and spreading.

Key Human Factors that Drive False Information Spreading

In the spirit of finding human solutions to the issue of false news, I researched human factors, both individual psychological and social collective, that drove false information spreading. It was fascinating to realize that one's belief system (a set of principles that helps one to see the world, the self, the other, and interpret everyday reality) played a huge if not decisive, role in identifying and deciding whether to spread false news. However, I did not quite find studies that worked with it and that presented cases on how to disclose belief systems in false information spreading and what to do with it. It might be an area for further research. I also listed some individual psychological factors and collective social behavior connected to false news spreading. It sheds light that even though technology plays a crucial role in false information growing as an issue, human psychology and sociology need to be studied, addressed, and integrated into strategies and solutions.

Leaving the technological aspect aside for now and following Vosoughi et al.'s (2018) hint that it is not bots but the human behavior that impacts how false information travels (p. 1150), I researched key human factors that drive false information spreading. Some of these drivers that I list below stem from individual psychology and collective social dynamic. I found that individual or group's belief systems played an important role in how information was treated and shared. However, I did not find studies that deal with underlying belief systems, values, and biases, that appeared in the form of "true" and "false" news, nor did I find studies that allowed different belief systems to engage and interact, thus working towards relationships and collaboration between different worldviews, especially in the public sphere.

Several studies show that news is considered true or false not necessarily because of its absolute trueness or falsity but because it correlates with a person's belief system. Mookherjee (2019) comes up with an empirical conclusion that congruent rumors that are consistent with one's predisposition nurture positive feelings. In contrast, incongruent rumors that do not align with one's predisposition produce negative emotions (p. 86). Besides, congruent rumors (p. 19) (positive news about a liked entity or negative information about a disliked entity (p. 87) are believed more than incongruent rumors (p. 19) (negative news about a liked entity and positive news about a disliked entity) (p. 87).

In other words, people “will believe congruent rumors (or rumors matching existing sentiments or existing predispositions towards an entity) more than incongruent information” (Mookherjee, 2019, p. 46) while considering incongruent information as a threat to an identity of an individual or a group. Bailey and Hsieh-Yee (2019) quote Rose-Wiles (2018), who says:

Life in this “post-truth” era means that information which appeals to a reader's emotion or conforms to his or her preconceived ideas tends to be accepted without question, while information that does not is likewise discarded without question—cementing preconceived notions and creating echo chambers. (p. 11)

McIntyre (2018) exemplifies how climate-change deniers do not believe in facts but instead select and accept only those facts that justify their ideology. He writes:

[Climate-change] Deniers and other ideologues routinely embrace an obscenely high standard of doubt toward facts they do not want to believe, alongside complete credulity toward any facts that fit their agenda. The main criterion is what favors their preexisting beliefs. (p. 11)

There is an international trend to bend reality to fit one's opinion rather than the other way around and use the interpretation of facts to their falsification (McIntyre, 2018). In addition, Moravec et al. (2019) conducted behavioral experiments to understand whether social media users can detect false news (and why assessing information truthfulness is difficult) and how

labeling false news impacts one's cognition and judgment. As a result, the authors find that flagging articles as false triggers more cognitive activity in readers. Still, it does not change users' beliefs that align with their political opinions. The researchers write, "Headlines that challenge their opinions receive little cognitive attention (i.e., they are ignored), and users are less likely to believe them" (Moravec et al., 2019, p. 1343). Echoing the above, Sanchez and Dunning (2021) write,

People frequently define themselves by the groups to which they belong and by the beliefs they hold most dear. They are often threatened by information that calls those self-aspects into question. As such, favorable beliefs about groups that agree with the self and unfavorable ones about groups we oppose can affirm defining aspects of the self and thus are endorsed and bolstered. Similarly, contrasting beliefs can evoke threat and dissonance and, thus, must be discounted or dismissed. (p. 1092)

So, information is true or false relative to one's social location and standpoint and connected to its power. Alternatively, information can be true due to motivated reasoning, when what people hope to be true "may color our perception of what actually is true" (McIntyre, 2018, p. 45). Or, suddenly, information can become false because of the "backfire effect" when one side rejects the evidence from the opposite side and "double down" or increase the strength of the own mistaken belief (McIntyre, 2018, p. 48). I had not seen it clearly stated like that or building research on it, but I saw that the above findings shifted the focus from defining true or false information to discovering values, beliefs, prejudices, worldviews, and narratives that stood beyond given information (true or false). I saw missing an additional perspective—from finding what was true or false to looking deeper into belief systems and narratives behind true or false information.

One of the reasons I did not see studies that worked with underlying belief systems was that it is a challenging task. After all, changing false text is easier than changing one's mindset. Beliefs become part of one's story and identity, with alternative information coming as a threat,

no matter how true. Clandinin and Huber (2010) define identity as a story-like composition, a story to live by (p. 161). Rabb et al. (2022) claim that the social theory says that people do not change their belief systems over time, and thus there is a defense mechanism towards the “identity-related beliefs” (p. 22) that people do not agree with. To support the above point, Lewandowsky et al. (2017) state, “An obvious hallmark of a post-truth world is that it empowers people to choose their reality, where existing beliefs and prejudices trump facts and objective evidence” (p. 361). In addition, self-perpetuating tendencies allow people to believe what they want to believe, with contrary evidence failing to find traction and paradoxically turning to strengthen existing beliefs (p. 361). McIntyre (2018) calls it a confirmation bias, a mechanism of interpreting information to align with one’s preexisting beliefs. Sanchez and Dunning (2021) come up with something similar, stating:

People frequently define themselves by the groups to which they belong and by the beliefs they hold most dear. They are often threatened by information that calls those self-aspects into question. As such, favorable beliefs about groups that agree with the self and unfavorable ones about groups we oppose can affirm defining aspects of the self and thus are endorsed and bolstered. Similarly, contrasting beliefs can evoke threat and dissonance and, thus, must be discounted or dismissed. (p. 1092)

In addition to individual psychological factors, there is a social aspect to belief or social conformity. McIntyre (2018) states that even the most incredible errors can be justified when others share a mistaken belief. He writes, “[I]rrational’ tendencies tend to be reinforced when we are surrounded by others who believe the same things we do” (p. 38). In summary, the author suggests that one should choose wisely what we are going to believe (p. 152). Indeed, there is a belief system behind false news to address if one wants to fight false information.

The above findings were crucial for my research from individual and social perspectives. They revealed that there was no absolute truth or falsity. However, there were visions, opinions, and narratives based on deeply seated belief systems of an individual or a group that was nearly

impossible to change or update as they were part of one's identity or ideological worldview that people tended to treat as set or fixed. Even if these opinions are false, they are still considered "true" by certain people who believe them. So, instead of fighting it or proving that someone's subjective "truth" is false, one possibility for human interventions might be to work with different values, beliefs, biases, and fears that undergird "false news" individually and publicly. To do so, one might develop individual flexibility skills and the ability to step into and understand the other's worldview. It is important, as Benhabib (1997) claims:

The ability of individuals and groups to take the standpoint of others into account, to be able to reverse perspectives and see the world from their point of view, is a crucial virtue of moral and aesthetic imagination in a civic polity. (p. 19)

In my research, I also wanted to consider what it took for individuals and groups of people to work with different belief systems and allowed them to engage and interact with each other.

In addition to the above, as it turns out, emotions play a massive role in spreading false information. False news spreads faster partly due to being highly emotionally charged information (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Sanchez and Dunning (2021) argue that emotional involvement in political views predicts who endorses misbelief in a partisan manner. The authors claim that "[T]hose that are emotionally invested might be most likely to be vulnerable to political misbelief" (p. 1092). They also state, "[E]motional investment might short-circuit the role of intelligence when emotional investment is high" (p. 1092). In other words, if misinformation meets one's political worldviews, it gets more traction, while any information, however true, gets rejected if it represents opposing views. The authors come up with the term "affective partisanship" (Sanchez & Dunning, 2021, p. 1091), which they claim to be an important aspect of today's political landscape.

Van Bavel et al. (2021) support the above claims by saying, “Morality and emotion indicate that news with a higher emotional charge and a degree of surprise increases the probability of sharing” (p. 97). Wilck (2021) explores how emotions influence the perception of information validity. She concludes that emotional intensity increases believability and confidence in the information read. She states that persuasive information often has an emotional interest, so “high levels of emotional experience increase susceptibility to fake news” (p. 18). In other words, emotional arousal from the news increases perceptions of the claim’s truthfulness, even if it is false or misleading. The author’s experiments prove that “False news was rated as more truthful than the true news when containing emotionally intense information” (Wilck, 2021, p. 27). It helps understand how people’s judgment is formed about the quality of information they encounter and how the level of confidence increases due to high emotions (p. 35).

Sivek (2018) investigates the emotional aspect of fake news and studies emotional analytics technologies in news distribution. She states that emotionally charged information spreads faster because of the human factor (as emotion is an intense “conditioner of preference” (p. 128) and decision-making (p. 132), and existing technological algorithms (if one clicks on emotional news, however false it is, social media is designed to bring more of such news to “benefit users’ emotional states” (p. 127) on the topic primarily for marketing goals). Eventually, Sivek (2018) concludes that technology and human decision-making processes are wired to follow emotions and preferences, not facts or rational thinking.

It was valuable to find that emotionally charged information would likely be perceived as truthful. To be more specific, Vosoughi et al. (2018) find out that false news travels faster, deeper, wider, and broader (p. 1147), to a great extent due to its novelty and ability to raise such

strong emotions as fear, surprise, and disgust. In contrast, the truth is associated with sadness, anticipation, and trust (p. 1150). While some may use these findings to keep producing emotionally engaging false content to increase people's buy-in, I think that emotional attachment to a piece of information (false or true) could be the entry door to finding out about belief systems and narratives of people; to see what is more urgent and important, for an individual or a group of people, to prioritize what to tackle first.

Other factors influencing false news spreading are connected to individual psychology and collective social dynamic. Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) state that there is unintentional dissemination of false news that may be connected to a wish of people to create or improve social relationships (socialization), to be perceived as an opinion leader (status-seeking), or to create a new archive to refer back later (information seeking). Alternatively, misinformation may be spread because of one's ideological reasons or simply because of entertainment or trolling motivations (p. 4). Kupferschmidt (2022) confirms that people are prone to share false content by seeking social validation (p. 1334). Fox (2020) supports the above claims by concluding that passing on misinformation is not irrational and is "a very human act" (p. 183), as it is motivated by human needs, including a form of exhibitionism (the need to assert status, being in the know), to entertain another and gain popularity, to bond with others, to prepare (individually or collectively) for the unexpected, "for reassurance and emotional support, or to externalize fears, wishes, and hostilities" (p. 183).

In addition to the above individual psychological factors, Van Bavel et al. (2021) mention that the spread of misinformation occurs as a result of partisan gain, to reach their own goals by creating an "us versus them" mentality and prove their position by negating the position of the other rather than seeking alternative information (p. 90); one's analytical thinking ability and/or

need for chaos and destruction due to being marginalized, socially isolated, and having status-seeking dominance tendencies (p. 95).

The above findings show that telling and spreading lies is not only a technological issue but also a human issue. There are psychological and social reasons to share false news—such as seeking status, gaining more power, popularity, leadership, better social relationships, emotional support from the outside, and even bringing more social justice. So far, existing studies focus on understanding the reasons for false information spreading. Thus, I did not see studies with findings on what to do with it yet, how to identify belief systems and frame them into stories and narratives that stand behind false information creation and spreading and what to do with it.

Examples of Work with Narratives

In the final section of my literature review, I looked at the field of narratives, why it might be the way to go with false news in the “post-truth” era, and several examples of working with narratives. I found out that narratives and counter-narratives (Villenas, 2001, p. 3) were a great way to highlight silent or marginalized voices and bring balance into the information field and public space. At the same time, I did not find any example of the analysis of narratives’ structure and usage of this structure for different narratives to engage and interact between each other.

In the “post-truth” era, McIntyre (2018) writes that “truth has been eclipsed” or become irrelevant (p. 5). There is an international trend to bend reality to fit one’s opinion rather than the other way around and use the interpretation of facts to their falsification (McIntyre, 2018). In the same vein, Wight (2018) ascertains that “[T]he concept of truth is used in ways that no longer align with what truth has traditionally been taken to mean” (p. 27). Thanks to the postmodernist lenses and findings of modern physics, truth is seen as a relative concept, with everyone’s truth

(even if it is falsity for the other) having its right to exist, place, and meaning. Thus, McIntyre (2018) puts it clearly: “There is no right answer, only narrative” (p. 125). Nash (2019) supports this claim by stating that his Zen word to a question regarding postmodernism and the post-truth era is “narrative.” He continues, “I’ll even add a few words: Find the person’s narrative, and you’ll find the person’s conception of truth” (p. 33). In other words, before labeling information as false, it may be worthwhile to consider the narratives that animate falsity—to relate to it rather than deny it altogether.

One example of working with narratives is Villenas’s (2001) ethnographic study about the life and struggles of the growing Latino community in Hope City, North Carolina, for 2 years. Through several inside interviews, the author allows Latina mothers to address hidden racism and discrimination toward their ethnic community in education, health, and social service. With the help of the researcher, Latina mothers share their own stories, which become “counter-narratives” (p. 3), to respond to existing deficit framing about the Latino population. Villenas’s study becomes a vehicle to bring marginalized voices to the public sphere—to respond to the general (in this case negative view of mothers with limited abilities) narrative that is false or oversimplified or ignorant and racist, because Latina mothers are even more capable in certain areas than it is blatantly or subtly presented in public communication. O’Grady et al. (2018) write about the importance of questioning meta-narratives that dominate, do not take them for granted, and use narrative methods to bring silenced and alternative knowledge (p. 153). Even though I liked this study a lot, I saw a limitation in the fact that such a study was done over 2 years, which was quite a luxury these days. Instead, I envisioned real-time interaction where people could share different worldviews through their narratives by representing the marginalized voices and relating to the more mainstream views.

Nash (2019) talks about re-writing and reframing narratives or “renarrativizing” (p. 34), especially the dominating stories—in one’s life or society. He believes, “We see what we believe; we observe what we narrate; we transform what we reframe” (p. 45). I saw a limitation in this work. It is not always easy to “transform what we reframe” (Nash, 2019, p. 45). In other words, transformation may not necessarily come from different wording by will. It may come from awareness about them, understanding of what is missing, what voices are silent or invisible, understanding of polarities in the narrative and their essences, expression of these essences or messages, or simply because the time has come for change.

Clandinin et al. (2007) make a point that “narrative inquiry [as a method] is much more than the telling of stories” (p. 21). They suggest thinking about the quality and impact of narrative inquiries and propose researchers be more wakeful as there are complex dimensions of narrative inquiry (p. 21). However, I did not see the authors suggested any tools to stay wakeful, understand and navigate this complexity, and retell and relive stories. As the authors claim, narrative inquiry is more challenging and comfortable than some may think (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 21). However, again, I did not find tools that would allow understanding the structure of narratives to navigate in the waters of many narratives, its dominant and missing pieces that were most likely connected to power dynamics, and surf its waves and streams, while not getting lost or drawn.

Examining which narratives are in focus and given value and which narratives are silenced or omitted partly depends on the question of power in a given time and context. Foucault introduces the idea that truth is connected to power (McIntyre, 2018, p. 126). Overall, Foucault shows that relations of power are “pervasive in epistemic endeavors” (Ortega, 2017, p. 507). McIntyre (2018) confirms it by saying, “If we look back throughout history, we realize that

the rich and powerful have always had an interest (and usually a means) for getting the ‘little people’ to think what they wanted” (p. 103) and create their own reality. It reminds me of the African wisdom that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Being aware of the aspect of power and how it is linked to the topic of truth and knowledge or let us say dominant narratives, may be important to work with different narratives.

Another example of working with narratives is presented by Christopher (2021) through “The Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation” project. The project has five components, including the one on narrative change (p. 671). A team takes national narratives connected to racial topics and discovers the belief system behind each narrative to create a new narrative meant to create a new reality. It looks promising. However, the key impact lies in its practice, which Christopher (2021) does not present in detail. From the information that is available I understand that narrative change design team takes national narratives connected to racial topics and discovers a belief system behind each narrative that is embedded in a social system—to come up with a new, more complete and accurate narrative, which is meant to create a new reality (pp. 671–672). The team has a clear vision of a “redesigned society that is no longer built on the premise of a hierarchy of human value” (p. 671), so they bring stories that have been misrepresented, objectified, and stereotyped in the U.S. media and institutions. The team claims that changing long-held ideas is not easy, but “those of us committed to a nation in which we tell complex truths rather than simple lies must take on this work” (Christopher, 2021, p. 672). Even if such a method of narrative change looked impressive and promising, still it was not exactly what I aimed for in my research. I did not aim to change anything or anybody, as I believed that

change would happen naturally if there was a facilitation of different belief systems and interaction between them.

One strong and practical example that I found very close to my research is the case about the Devil-Baby at Hull-House Settlement discussed by Jane Addams (1916). Addams takes the obviously false claim or rumors about this mythical creature without denying them and uses them as an opportunity to listen to and uncover the many women's stories and pains that need to be heard, addressed and integrated into the whole society. In my research I wanted to look at false information as the path to the diversity of narratives that represented different belief systems and worldviews—to bring them to the surface and interact with them to make something meaningful out of it instead of marginalizing it further.

Conclusion

I started my literature review by researching the general attitude toward false news as a phenomenon and how it is defined and framed in scholarly circles. The issue is presented as a threat and danger to humanity, which is disempowering for human beings to access it. It is mainly depicted as a disease that needs to be cured or overcome. Then I examined existing strategies and solutions to deal with false news. Not surprisingly, most strategies aim to fight false news, and there is a great focus on technological solutions rather than human interventions. To research the latter, I looked at key human factors that drive false information spreading. Besides psychological individual and collective social factors, belief systems that stand behind false news play a huge role in how information is classified: true if it is in line with one's values, and false if it is opposing one's worldview. So, I have concluded that behind false information, there is a story and a belief system to be disclosed, identified, and made available to work and interact with. To understand more what is being done in identifying and working with belief

systems, I looked at examples of working with narratives in public space. I find only a few working examples.

With my research, I hoped that I could make my small contribution to understanding the complex structure of narratives and providing some navigation panel for an individual or a group of people to make interventions for processes to flow, allowing different belief systems, narratives and worldviews to relate to each other, even if they were considered to be hostile to each other.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

The world of facts is crucial. Naming things as they are and refuting falsity can be a matter of life and death, especially in war. However, some issues and topics cannot be “fixed” with facts, simply because in the post-truth era, facts, however accurate, can go against one’s ideology, beliefs, standpoint, identity, lifeworld, and worldview (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Kupferschmidt, 2022; McIntyre, 2018; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Lifeworld is a concept from hermeneutics that describes subjective perception of the world and experience of everyday life, “the sum total of physical surroundings and everyday experiences that make up an individual’s world” (Addeo, 2010, p. 15).

James Baldwin (1985) makes a powerful statement about one’s inability to hear and accept the truth because it threatens one’s identity, belief system, and how one sees the world. He writes on the double-bind of White folk: “White America remains unable to believe that Black America’s grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country” (p. 536). Thus, paradoxically, not believing some facts, however accurate, and spreading information that the other side considers as false or unreal is not always possible because it is a security question and a way to preserve one’s identity, which, psychologically speaking, can also be a matter of life and death. In other words, beyond the level of facts, there is a realm where spreading truth for some can be a matter of life and death, and for others, spreading “falsity” (I put in parentheses because it can be false for one side, and true for another, consciously or unconsciously, and there is no agreement on it), can be a matter of life and death.

What to do in such situations when fact-checking fails to stop false information from spreading and makes things even worse (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020), leaving one side to believe in the truth, however false it looks to another. What to do when such a split between people and groups makes triadic closures (Asikainen et al., 2020) and forms groups of like-minded people who share the same perception of the world and become hostile to the other, with even greater disbelief. What to do when there is no single right or wrong answer, and there is a diversity of standpoints and views, while naming something false fuels the fire and escalates a situation to the extreme, leading to physical violence and wars? Could we still live together as neighbors and relate to each other? If yes, then how? In my research, I was interested in following this direction and working with false information in cases when facts alone no longer worked. I saw it happening in the war in Ukraine between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups since 2014. I wanted to study two questions:

1. How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?
2. What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?

My studies mainly focused on understanding different narratives or storylines behind “false information” and seeing if doing so changed anything in the relationship field between individuals, groups, and countries. My primary motivation or a driving force behind this research—was relationships and how we, people, could process information, however false, and by doing so, manage to live together with all our diversity without waging wars. I embarked on this research intending to make our relationships with each other better. In my research, I focused on “false information” and how one could open up to it and understand it through a story

or narrative beyond “right and wrong” to relate to it and to the other, especially in situations when there was no conversation going on.

By understanding narratives, I meant understanding different streams of information behind false information or false claims—to make them visible, outline, and frame them so that different worldviews could not only have space but can express themselves and interact with each other, for an individual or a group of people to become aware of the self, the other, and potentially the field that held both polarities, or several views and stories.

As an example, that I took to run a little test before I started my research journey, I brought a case on Trump’s falsehood: in 2017, he claimed that crime was on the rise, while the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) showed it was on a near-historic low (McIntyre, 2018, p. 2). There was an interview by a CNN reporter with a Trump supporter. In the conversation, the CNN reporter tried to prove that the crime rates were low according to statistics from the FBI, while Trump’s supporter was even more entrenched in his view, claiming, “The average American, I will bet you this morning, does not think crime is down, does not think we are safer” (McIntyre, 2018, p. 3). To make a long story short, such an exchange did not convince either of the two sides.

Now, if I looked at the situation, there were two narratives: one claimed that the crime rate was low according to statistics, and another said that it was not safer, according to some people’s subjective views. While it might look like the first narrative was right and the second was false, both storylines existed, and they were somehow right. They might belong to different realities, though the first one to the world of facts and the second one to the world of subjective opinions. However, both might be true, and I could even find people or maybe even one person who occasionally might think that it was safer on the streets of America, and at other times was

afraid and did not feel safe, especially given the existing political split. These two narratives or information streams existed despite having no outer agreement. So, my approach was not to focus on who was right or wrong, true or false, but on revealing these narratives and allowing them to engage and interact with each other. It could be the way to process or recycle information, allowing the conversation between two sides to flow rather than get stuck.

In the situation above, in addition to two clearly stated narratives, there was another pair of less visible stories. One storyline was about unwillingness to listen to the other because what the other said was considered nonsense. In any case, this narrative was shared by both sides of the interview. Another narrative that was missing and not represented by anyone in the conversation yet was the one that opened up to the information of the other, however false, and became genuinely curious to hear more about it and learn. It should be tested, but I hypothesized that bringing the missing narrative and position of the one who wanted to learn more could impact the dynamic and bring more flow into the relationships that looked stuck between two sides. Even if two sides might not end up persuading each other at the end of the day, at least they could step out of the fight about who was right or wrong for a moment and find a new connection or some kind of shared ground, even if for a split second. To integrate the missing narrative of interest and curiosity despite seemingly false information would not be a simple task, and hence was my sub-question above: “What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs of the other?”

Research Design & Approach

For my research design and approach, I used the qualitative focus group research method with direct and indirect feedback, debriefs, and supervisions as analysis tools to answer my research questions. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers collect data in the

field, a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study; they do inductive data analysis that establishes patterns or themes. Usually, the topics for qualitative research are emotion-laden, close to people, and practical (Creswell, 2007, p. 43). In qualitative study, a researcher becomes a key data collection and analysis instrument, using multiple forms such as observations, conversations, and interventions. At the same time, even if a researcher is part of the research process and could be an active participant of it, deeply involved in the issue, she or he is not an expert. Instead, experts are the people in the field or a given context.

There are different paradigms of qualitative research, its design structure has an emergent nature, as it may evolve along with the study. The writing process can be scientific, in the form of storytelling, performance, or art. As to the final report, Creswell (2007) writes that it includes the voices of participants, including certain quotes, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and the reflexivity of the researcher, her/his ability to make sense of data and bring them into categories or themes (p. 43). In addition, Breen (2006) states that final report should contain unexpected findings (p. 472). Creswell (2007) writes, “[Q]ualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 37). In addition, the final report includes readers of the study, as they partly influence and shape the way the research findings are presented to the world and perceived.

To gather data, I used the focus group framework. Focus groups as a method is defined as a group discussion that explores specific issues through active encouragement of group interaction among participants. Interaction is considered to be a key feature of the method and data analysis (Webb & Kevern, 2001). According to Webb and Kevern, who analyzed over 40 studies with the application of the focus groups method, nearly all definitions of focus groups

center on the use of interaction among participants as a way of “accessing data that would not emerge if other methods were used” (p. 800). Developing an emphasis on interaction, Kitzinger (1995) writes that “The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible on a one-to-one interview” (Webb and Kevern, 2001, p. 800). Moreover, in the interaction process, there is a potential for modification or even change of opinions, leading to evolving (not static) consensus through the development of a discussion. So, according to Stevens (1996), the focus group method can raise greater consciousness among participants (p. 804).

As I wanted to use narratives as a methodological device, primarily during the analysis process in real-time during the focus group discussion and post-factum, here I saw an interconnection between focus group methodology and narrative inquiry, as within the narrative approach “Sharing stories facilitates the emergence of new perspectives and new ways of understanding” (Shaw, 2017, p. 223). Thus, when stories of different experiences are shared, worldviews change, and when worldviews change, new policies and procedures that reflect those changes are created (Shaw, 2017, p. 223).

The focus group method works with existing fields holistically, not just viewing individual parts separately but working with the whole social system and interaction between different parts. That is why, looking systemically and knowing that groups shape individuals, it is important to keep in mind that individuals in focus groups may not necessarily express their individual views, as they speak in a specific context, culture, and time (Gibbs, 1997, p. 4). Thus, focus groups has a social collective action, and in some instances, it tends towards social action research. Not all researchers do so, but Stevens (1996), for example, writes that in her research on nursing, focus groups as a method is used to facilitate the inclusion of segments of the

population who have been underserved by previous research and “generate a depth of understanding about public health problems, community strengths, and potential interventions that have local meaning and utility” (p. 170). So, focus groups not only work as a method to collect and analyze data but also potentially contribute to the better well-being of a certain group or society and a “growing consciousness of collective phenomena” (Stevens, 1996, p. 173); to a learning experience, both for participants and the researcher (Breen, 2006, p. 473); and they can be empowering for participants (Gibbs, 1997, p. 3), especially if such focus groups can possibly become a forum for change (Race et al., 1994).

Even though I did not find specific information about how focus groups were conducted and how to deal with diversity of cultures, power structures, majority and minority positions, the review of over 40 studies showed that a lot depended on the skills of a researcher and his/her ability to encourage interaction (Webb & Kevern, 2001, p. 803). Webb and Kevern (2001) note that very few examples discuss details of interaction processes in the focus groups, including the quality or energy or mood and atmosphere of interaction, like the presence of jokes and disagreements, to name a few. Based on these findings and my personal scant experience participating in focus groups when I was working in a corporation years ago, I assumed there was a risk that a researcher’s constraints would become the constraints for implementing the method. In addition, the overall group setting or a phase that a group is currently in—can carry a risk of having superficial and uncritical discussions, as it sometimes happens according to Webb and Kevern (2001, p. 803).

Moreover, from the experience of working with groups, there is a general tendency to (fear and thus) organize and control groups to avoid potential chaos. However, in this case, there is a risk of coming to obvious results and highlighting more known data or lead to pre-defined

results. Bion recognizes that when a group is organized, its unknown and unconscious aspects remain underground (Dworkin, 1989, p. 31). The focus group framework allows to be open to a group to express itself. Gibbs (1997) writes that the focus group moderator “has to allow participants to talk to each other, ask questions and express doubts and opinions, while having very little control over the interaction other than generally keeping participants focus on the topic” (p. 4). In my research, I wanted to touch the unknown or hidden or less conscious and thus more surprising aspects of information through narratives. I wanted to apply ProcessWork or the Process-Oriented Psychology paradigm within the focus groups framework, which allowed groups to organize and express themselves in their own way, revealing its organizing principle or a general background field, the concept developed and used by Lewin, Ezriel, Jung, and Foulkes, that connects group members to each other and to the environment (Dworkin, 1989, p. 41). According to Moreno, it is an “actual, dynamic, central structure underlying and determining all formal groupings” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 38). ProcessWork is a paradigm that is meant to bring awareness to what is happening in a focus group—to allow interaction with all its diverse (and sometimes mutually exclusive) parts or positions, both manifest and latent, and find some new order or equilibrium in the “chaos.” It will serve the purpose of the focus group methodology to generate data through the interaction process between its various parts or positions.

My role as a researcher was to observe what was happening on an individual and group or collective levels, outline visible or invisible information (tone of voice, silences, tension, subjective feelings and emotions, and even dreams of individuals and a group)—to allow the interaction in focus groups to happen that is meant to serve for collection and analysis of the data. Thus, for me as a researcher, potential chaos in focus groups was something not to be afraid of but welcome and become aware, as it could become a ground for new or invisible information

to emerge and become visible, to create better understanding among different positions, and as a result facilitate processes to impact changes in people's perception, group atmosphere, and relationships among diverse views. Bohm (1968) states that what is commonly called "disorder" "is merely an inappropriate name for what is a certain rather complex kind of order that it is difficult to describe in full detail" (p. 140). As cited by Dworkin (1989) Prigogine also talks about disequilibria and chaos within a system that can become a source of order and how changes that are caused by a minority in a group can cause a whole system to shift to a new order (pp. 60–61). If facilitated, chaos can potentially become a creative process that inspires interaction, which is something to keep an eye on while applying the focus group methodology in my research.

On the question of the reliability of the focus group data, there are two indicators, according to Breen (2006): (a) the extent to which participants agreed/disagreed on issues, and (b) the frequency of participant opinion shift during the discussion (pp. 472–473). Overall, focus groups not only can carry social action, but also are an important learning experience for all, including the researcher. The researcher's own viewpoint or position on the topic, in relation to the opinions in focus groups, and how it shifts and transforms during and after a discussion—is yet another important indicator of data reliability (Breen, 2006, p. 473). That all was included in the final report.

Research Procedure

As I worked professionally in the field of conflict resolution and communication individually and with groups, since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, I co-facilitated biweekly meetings with the Ukrainian community. In addition, I co-facilitated group discussions with 20 to a 100 of people worldwide and had been part of the faculty of the global leadership

think-tank and learning hub, Deep Democracy Institute, for over 14 years. So, I used my wide network in Ukraine and worldwide to organize focus groups for my research, mostly on the international level. I used social media, like Facebook and LinkedIn to invite wider circles of people to participate in focus groups, which I organized online on a Zoom platform.

To gain my primary data, I organized three focus group discussions and used debriefs as a tool to get both (a) direct feedback by asking the participants in large or smaller groups (via breakout rooms), (b) indirect feedback by observing non-verbal communication and feeling the general mood in the groups during the whole discussion and in the end, in collaboration with the observer that I invite to join to my research when possible. According to Lewin, social climate and atmosphere are empirical realities that can be scientifically tested and described as facts (Dworkin, 1989, p. 29). Breen (2006) confirms the idea of collecting direct and indirect feedback and suggests to use a narrative analysis that “extends beyond what people say, and into how they say it” (p. 472). Thus a researcher does not only gather the verbal content, but also looks into and understands the “layers of meaning” (Breen, 2006, p. 472) during a conversation, trying to find a gap between what people say and do (Gibbs, 1997, p. 3).

Overall, I conducted three focus group discussions online with participants from three to 12 and up to 15 people as it is recommended by Gibbs and other researchers such as MacIntosh, Goss and Leinbach (Gibbs, 1997, p. 4). Two focus group discussions were organized on a group level with international participants; the third focus group was a container for the relationship work publicly between two people, one with Ukrainian origin, and another with Russian origin. Each focus group lasted up to 1.5 hours and had English as a core language. Each focus group listed several false claims or beliefs that were considered to be most difficult for participants, identified one to work on together, and then had a facilitated discussion. It is important to

mention that each group defined the topic to focus on, to make it ethically correct and ensure a free choice and will, without imposing any topic on any focus group. The topic of relationship work was a choice among core participants as well. Organizing focus groups on different levels, collective and relationship, I had a possibility to research my questions in different contexts.

Selection Criteria: Topics and Participants

While choosing a topic, one can argue that there is a difference between a “big” public media topic and a “small” personal topic connected to false information. Indeed, there is a wide range of topics, from personal to geopolitical, and an enormous scale of false information classification, from being completely or partially false. However, the point of my research was to be able to take any topic and try to understand the narrative behind a false claim; if one of the sides considered it to be false (fully or by one percent) and facts alone did not bring any solution, leaving one side insisting on one’s truth, even if another side treats it as false. On top of it, the topics can be big or small but contain the very same narrative. For example, with the case above about the “Ukrainians are Nazis” topic, I can take a good-hearted Russian person who tells me that he has a hard time being in my presence because I, as a Ukrainian, make his life complicated: he hates himself for what is going on. At first sight, the “big” public media topic may have nothing to do with the “small” personal topic mentioned above. However, the narrative is the same in both public and personal topics: your presence makes my life complicated, or put it radially, in order for me to exist and live well, you need to “die” or disappear, even for a while, which is the basic war principle, according to Foucault (Bhandaru, 2013, p. 236). So, working on personal or public topics does not matter, as in both cases, one does world politics by touching upon the narrative at the core of both claims. Thus, in my research, for the sake of the

experiment, I wanted to take both personal and public topics, with false information that might range from being 100% or 1% wrong as judged by the other side.

The final choice of a topic to be discussed was decided upon by participants of each focus group. In the beginning of each discussion I as a core facilitator inquired about false claims or false beliefs that one had hard times dealing with. Then we would have a list of false claims or false belief, and out of this list I and one of my colleagues would facilitate the process of choosing one topic that was the most energetic one for a specific group, time and context. Then each focus group would focus on one false claim or false belief in greater depth. It might be a very personal situation, or a global one. From the paragraph above, the idea was to be able to deal with false claims of any scale and any level.

The selection criteria for participating in the focus groups for my research were simple: as the question of false information touched literally everyone, I invited mere citizens and people over 18 years old from different walks of life, professions, and cultures, anyone who was interested in group discussions and a certain topic. Two global focus groups were open for citizens from all countries. A group with a focus on relationship work was between two colleagues and co-facilitators coming from two warring countries: Ukraine and Russia, with one observer-facilitator from the worldwide deep democracy learning community.

I envisioned that interest and engagement would be a key driver for conversation and interaction between participants, which was the ground for data collection and analysis instrument in the focus group methodology. In addition, I suspected that it would be important for each group to be diverse enough, to bring various opinions and views to interact with. At the same time, from an ethical point of view, and for safety, security, and health reasons, I understood that some group discussion topics might be even dangerous for certain people to

attend and discuss. Each topic would inform me as a researcher and give clues on who to invite. For example, talking about the war in Ukraine, I would not invite Russian people, even good-hearted ones, into a conversation yet, simply because for the Ukrainian side it is too painful and re-traumatizing, and for the Russian side it can be physically dangerous (even online), which I as an organizer was responsible for.

To ensure the diversity of people and opinions in each focus group, I sent an invitation to participate in focus group discussions via email and social media (Facebook and LinkedIn), using my wide network and beyond, inviting people to spread information further in their personal and professional circles.

Focus Group Guide to Design of the Interaction Process and Analysis

The design for the interaction process during three focus groups was informed by my training and practice as a ProcessWork psychologist. ProcessWork, known as Deep Democracy, is an awareness-based paradigm, developed by Arnold Mindell, the physicist and Jungian psychologist, in 1980s. It has been successfully applied for individual, relationship, group facilitation, and conflict resolution in local communities and for international leaders (Menken, 2021). Unlike other group work paradigms, ProcessWork brings awareness around majority and minority voices, with its basic assumption that majority and minority positions together define a given group (Dworkin, 1989, p. 90). Dworkin writes, “Only when both majority and minority opinions make their contribution to the group’s life can the whole of the group be expressed” (p. 92). Thus, the ProcessWork allows to notice, frame, recognize, voice, and include all the many voices, including contradictory or marginalized ones in a given field—for a communication between different sides to flow and for a group wisdom to manifest itself and bring unexpected solutions or perspectives.

For my research, in each of focus group interaction a team of facilitators would give a frame and invite participants to name “the biggest lie” or the most difficult “false belief” on an individual, community, or national/international level that was most disturbing and hard to deal with, or that made one life complicated. Then, we facilitated a sorting process for a group to choose one of such “false beliefs,” “lies,” or “false claims” (I put in quotations, because I am aware that these can be subjective perspectives). After that we got deeper into a topic or a chosen “false belief” and had a facilitated discussion to understand the narrative behind it and tried to interact with it. Such a design was guided by the ProcessWork approach that followed the natural process, or flow of signals, of an individual or a group, in contrast to a predetermined program (Mindell and Mindell, n.d., p. 59).

In order to balance the limitations of me as researcher, organizer and facilitator connected to my cultural and professional background, personal and collective history, I invited an observer to two focus group events, Nader Shabahangi (U.S.), who would also be a source of data and validation for my study, as I wanted to synchronize my observations and analysis with the observer, what he noticed and experienced within and in relation to a given focus group—on a visible level, and what he sensed beyond the spoken words like general moods, shifts in the atmosphere, silence, or incongruences between what people said and did, to name a few. Equally, the ultimate validation would be done by the reader of my research, whether the key findings speak to a person and give some insight or not.

In the interaction process of each focus group, I used the role theory, which had been a part of traditional sociological thinking for at least half a century, with its roots in the American intellectual development and its parents, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, William James, and John Dewey (Dworkin, 1989, p. 140). Roles are like actors in a script provided by

society. According to Mead, roles differ from individuals, they are “constellations of behaviors that are responses to sets of behaviors of other human beings” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022, para. 11). Such roles can be a wife, a mother, a child, a doctor, a teacher, a student, a fireman, a boss, or a president, to name a few, with each role carrying certain emotions and attitudes, “and when an individual adopts a particular role, he or she is influenced by it and takes on its characteristics” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 140). Moreover, I would add that each role carries certain narratives, belief systems and myths. While working with focus groups I can identify roles, using role-taking and role playing, the notions from sociological and social-psychological literature that mean taking the attitudes or perspectives of others (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022, para. 11), Or equally I can search for narratives (spoken or implied), and by doing so, I can potentially understand and bring an essence or a message of a side that tells lies or shares falsity. Dworkin (1989) writes, “Myths influence how we perceive reality; when we bring a set of beliefs to a situation, those myths or beliefs create a sense through which we determine what is real” (p. 70). My task as a researcher was to ensure interaction to allow such myths, narratives, ideologies and belief systems, individual and collective, to come out through what people said, how they talked and what they did. Gibbs (1997) writes that the interaction between participants highlights people’s view of the world (p. 3), and the role of a moderator is to promote debate and ask open questions, non-judgmentally, to potentially challenge participants and “tease out a diverse range of meanings on the topic under discussion” (pp. 4–5). Closely following the interaction, I tried to listen to stories that people say and also crafted stories out what people say, tracked narratives and counter-narratives that were present or missing, to bring them in, and allow the interaction to happen within a group. The innovative

element in my research was not only to hear and understand different stories and/or roles, but allow them to interact between each other.

During the preparation phase for each focus group I did the following: (a) analyzed each topic to hypothetically assume potential narratives and counter-narratives in each case, knowing that these assumption are to be corrected by the group; (b) did innerwork—to find a ground, or in other words, an understanding of each story or side, or else I would not be able to welcome all views; and (c) prepared to ask open questions, as Gibbs (1997) suggests during the discussion, and be ready for any turns in a focus group’s conversation; for this I drafted a set of initial questions, to begin with, knowing that the group would lead the interaction, and I as a researcher was to follow it. After all, as Shaw (2017) puts it, some scholars do not proceed into the field with defined questions, but rather, “with a broad orientation to experience, and with wonders about who people are in the midst of their experiences” (p. 211). So, I kept my focus on open conversations, collaborative involvement, and engagement with people’s stories, rather than on interviewing format of asking questions and receiving answers.

In addition, I wanted to mention that sometimes questions might be irrelevant and can stop a discussion, as they sound critical or touch upon things that are hard to speak about, or aimed to lead to certain pre-programmed answers. So, instead of asking questions, to spur a discussion often it is more effective for me as a facilitator to represent certain assumptions about some views and then ask participants to correct me. For example, if I ask one side—tell me more why you think Ukrainians are Nazis—this question will freeze rather than inspire a conversation, putting a person that I ask on the spot, which is not going to help the discussion to flow. That is why I used not only questions, but my assumptions stemming from the innerwork—to allow to get to the essence of the narrative of each side—with the help of participants. I prepared to be

present to the moment and use all my preparation for the group discussion and experience during all these years to improvise too, and then did my analysis and report on what worked or not, and what narratives emerged.

In my research process, reaching saturation of data was limited to identifying different narratives, seeing if that impacted the dynamics of each group, and if two sides within a group could come to some consensus. Besides, the timing of up to 1.5 hours for each discussion was also a frame for when the right moment was to end a discussion. However, as it was mentioned before, much depended on the skills of facilitating or moderating such discussions.

To collect data, I used four sources of information: what people in experimental groups said explicitly, including the verbalized feedback; what people in groups did not speak about or what is implied and/or remains unspoken for certain (good) reasons, including the non-verbal feedback; what I observed and experienced as a core facilitator and researcher; and what an observer noticed and experienced within and in relation to each group. In the research process, I did fieldwork to allow a given field to express itself through different people, experiences, and views. Czarniawska (1998) identifies the field as a space where “the Other” (p. 21) lives. She writes, “[T]o me, fieldwork is an expression of curiosity of the Other, about the people who construct their worlds differently from the way I construct mine” (p. 21). As a result, it can be a major threat to the researcher’s identity (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 41) and identify a given group and sub-groups. Being aware of it, my focus groups were a source of collecting data and a ground for specific changes on an individual or collective level.

To analyze data, instead of transcribing the whole conversation of each focus group’s discussion, I followed quite a common practice for the focus group methodology: to use coding, categorizing, and identifying themes (Webb & Kevern, 2001, p. 801) and narratives. Eventually,

I came up with an analysis of different patterns, themes and stories. To support this process, I used the “methodological device” of crafted stories (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 826). It is when stories are not written word by word but are derived from what several people say, conveying the essence or key patterns. Regarding crafting stories, Crowther et al. state, “Solely focusing on transcribed verbatim data can leave [scholars] ... lost in semantic meanings” (p. 834) that impoverish the research. In addition, crafted stories can become individual stories and collective stories conveying a common understanding of experiences. So, in my research, I wanted to collect and craft narratives that stood behind false information, to be able to understand, relate to them, engage and interact with them.

The Role of the Researcher

As I mentioned above, talking about the process of collecting data, in my research, the researcher is also a channel for data collection and analysis. As a researcher and a core facilitator of focus group discussions, with my history and background, I could not and did not want to be a neutral observer. Moreover, my own biases and limitations connected to my professional background, personal and collective history, and the context of war could serve well for facilitating focus group interactions.

Being trained in ProcessWork, a conflict-resolution method that uses knowledge from anthropology, modern physics, and ancient wisdom, Taoism, I used these lenses during the data collection and analysis, as it had become my way of being and seeing the world for the last 12 years. I intend to not talk much about this paradigm, as it is not a focus of my research, and if a reader becomes interested in it, he/she/they may learn about it on their own.

Ethical Measures

To ensure ethical measures, I used the electronic version of a consent form with participants clicking on “I Agree” button before all three focus group events, following the procedure of the “Expedited IRB” guidelines involving no more than minimal risk. During registration process and before each focus group discussion, every participant signed the electronic form with “I consent” button. In the invitation I clearly framed that these focus groups were used for the research purposes, and attached the consent form for participants to read, get acquainted with it and sign. In my analysis I kept all names of the participants confidential. The text of a consent form is attached to the dissertation.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to my study: personal, cultural, contextual, and methodological. As a researcher doing qualitative study, I am a source of limitations connected to my own cultural and professional background, personal and collective history as a Ukrainian, skills, areas for learning, interests, and dreams connected to making wars obsolete by publicly processing difficult information in the field, before it grows into the monstrous violence and killings that does not solve issues firsthand and rather brings more suffering on the planet. After all, I have my own ideology or a set of beliefs, or narratives that may look “false” or incomplete, one-sided or naive to some. The idea is not to change or hide it, but make it clear and bring it in, to outline my “falsity” and make it visible for readers to be aware while they read my research findings and make their own conclusions.

In addition, my research methodology is qualitative and a lot will depend on my ability to support interaction in focus groups to generate and collect data, especially in topics that touch me personally intellectually and emotionally, to stay open to what is happening during the research

process, and to do analysis that will lead to my key findings and contribution. That means that my research is highly subjective. However, I used this subjectivity during the research to work on myself, and my personal limitations, to become aware, stand for them, represent them openly, and integrate into the research, to make the best use of it. So, I aimed to become aware of my limitations and use my biases—as additional source of data for my research, knowing about the holographic nature of individuals and groups, which says that what is present in the global field is reflected in local and individual contexts (Dworkin, 1989, p. 102).

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I report the results of my research and provide analysis. My study examined how one can deal with false information, fake news, propaganda, and rumors in a highly complex information space in times of information wars of the 21st century and make some sense of it, using the lenses of ProcessWork or Deep Democracy. In other words, I am trying to find alternative ways to address falsities, beyond fighting them only. To do so, I posed two research questions:

1. How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?
2. What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?

Qualitative analysis of the three focus group discussions organized in December 2023 identified three key themes. The first two themes answer the first research question, and the third theme answers the second research question. Below I list each question and present the themes in greater detail. In summary form the three key themes are the following:

Theme #1: Finding the Narrative Behind Falsity

Finding a narrative behind falsity allows to move from facts to interaction, and empowers people to see, frame and engage with another story, view, position, or a belief system.

Theme #2: Falsity as Evidence of an Unresolved Dilemma

Behind falsity there is a relationship field and connected to it a common tendency to avoid conflicts. Behind falsity there are unresolved relationship issues between different and opposing viewpoints or belief systems. Thus, falsity can be a sign that there is a possible split, a dilemma and a tension on how to be the self and stay in relationships.

Theme #3: Human Experience and Capacity to Hold Polarities is Crucial

There is a high demand in a humane capacity, a talent and a skill to be open to different stories, feel into and hold both polarities at the same time to allow an interaction between them to happen.

It is important to notice that all three themes are not separate but may be entangled. Thus, in discussing my second theme I refer to the first theme and work with narratives that one can find behind “false” claims of the other in the context of describing different stories shared by the participants. I also find the second and the third themes highly interconnected, or one flowing from another. Below I link each theme to my research questions and further elaborate each one, based on my qualitative analysis. In the process, I present some fragments of interaction between participants from all three focus groups, followed by my reflections as a researcher and discussion.

Data Collection

I conducted three focus groups in December 2023. Focus groups as a method are defined as group discussions between three to 15 people (Gibbs, 1997, p. 4) that explore specific issues through active encouragement of group interaction among participants. Interaction is considered a key feature of the method and data analysis (Webb & Kevern, 2001). Even though there is no single way to conduct focus groups in scholarly literature, a lot depends on the skills of a researcher and his/her ability to encourage interaction (Webb & Kevern, 2001, p. 803). Thus, in my focus groups, I used the ProcessWork approach, also known as Process Oriented Psychology or Deep Democracy, as I am trained in it and use it in my daily life and work. Unlike other group work paradigms, ProcessWork is a signal-based paradigm that is meant to bring awareness around polarities in the field, with majority or mainstream and minority or marginal voices to be

voiced and included for a group to fully express itself (Dworkin, 1989, p. 90). The researcher is an observer who deepens existing voices and brings missing ones, including unpopular and uncomfortable ones, to allow interaction in a group between different sides or viewpoints. The ProcessWork researcher knows that a field is polarized, and out of the interaction between these polarities, some themes and insights or findings emerge.

As part of my research design, I organized focus group meetings online via Zoom in the following way. After welcoming, thanking participants, and doing a brief introduction, I framed my research topic and encouraged everyone to share some of “the biggest lies” or “falsities” of our times that they encounter or think about or get disturbed by. I use parentheses, indicating that lies or falsities could be subjective for each participant. The idea was to collect sub-topics on an individual, group, or national level, then pick one and go deeper to find out narratives or stories behind a given “false belief” and see if doing so changes anything in relation to this false information. Suggesting that, I created space for each group participants to share their sub-topics of interest within the research topic, leaving freedom for each group to decide which sub-topic to choose. Thus, I wanted to not organize and program each group to a desired theme but allow the field or the organizing principle of each group to reveal itself, possibly in unexpected and unimaginable ways. The concept of field or the intentional field is like a “magnetic field that organizes and guides us through life; a guiding wave that is invisible and immeasurable”; it moves individuals and groups (Mindell, 2016, p. 19). I used it to allow the conversation to flow in a non-determined way, driven by certain times, cultural and political contexts, and locations, instead of driving my own agenda. In support of it, Gibbs (1997) says, “It is important to keep in mind that individuals in focus groups may not necessarily express their individual views, as they speak in a specific context, culture, and time” (p. 4). Similar to people shaping the existing group

space or field, the field shapes people, and for me, it was important to research what was in a given field in relation to the topic of false information, looking for alternative ways to deal with it in addition to existing fighting strategies.

Sample

All three focus group discussions were open to the public, and about 95% of the people who came were from my immediate network, from the Deep Democracy Institute worldwide. These people were, in one way or another, interested in facilitation, inner work or work with the self, greater awareness, world topics, and ongoing training, so there was a richness of skills and knowledge in each focus group. The first focus group had twelve participants from different walks of life and countries such as Australia, Catalonia, Denmark, Germany, Kenya, Russia, Thailand, Ukraine, and the U.S. The second focus group had sixteen participants from Australia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Switzerland, Russia, Scotland, Thailand, Ukraine, and the U.S. The third focus group had three people from Russia, Ukraine, and the U.S. The participants of all three focus groups are unique and could stand out from other focus groups.

In my analysis and discussion of results here in this chapter I refer to participants using random letters from the alphabet. In order to protect confidentiality, these letters have no correlation with the name or surname of participants. Whenever I quote participants from the third focus group discussion, I use such descriptions as “Participant of Ukrainian origin” and “Participant of Russian origin” without indicating any names, preserving the information about one’s national origin, as it is important for understanding the larger context of the conversation.

Data Analysis

During the data analysis that led me to identify my key three themes I used ProcessWork lenses. They helped me notice and track different streams of information that were clearly stated

or implied and hidden. ProcessWork lenses helped me identify polarities and social roles. I used my observations on what people said and how they said it, paying particular attention to some energetic moments in a conversation, with high emotional moments, both positive and negative. I also used my senses to see how all three research events were interrelated. In addition, I applied narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2013), crafting stories (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 826) from bits and pieces of what participants shared to outline spoken or unspoken narratives from different sides to express them, to make them more complete and thus a bit easier to engage and interact with. This process allowed me to come up with key themes to answer my research questions and identify ideas for future studies.

Focus Group Discussions Overview

After a short introduction, each group was given space to list different sub-topics of the outlined topic and then choose what to focus on to deepen the conversation. The choice of each group was facilitated to identify not a majority of votes, but the level of energy, indicating what topic caught more “fire” from a particular group. The first focus group worked on the sub-topic of “How to stay in relation with opposing information.” The second focus group worked on “Open lies in times of war,” and the third focus group worked on generalizations and categorization of each other based on one’s nationality, Ukrainian or Russian in this case, and how it increased tension within the content of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The first two focus groups worked on a group level, and the third one touched upon personal and relationship levels. After a discussion for 60 to 90 minutes, there were 5 to 20 minutes for reflection within each group.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

In this section I list each of my research questions, bring key theme(s) as an answer, and describe each theme in greater detail, including my analysis and some piece from discussions of the focus groups. The first research question has two key themes as a response, and the second research question has one theme that provides beginning answers for further studies.

Research Question #1. How Can Revealing and Understanding Narratives Behind False Claims Impact the Relationships with Diverse and Opposing Viewpoints?

Theme #1: Finding the Narrative Behind Falsity

Finding a narrative behind falsity allows to move from facts to interaction, and empowers people to see, frame and engage with another story, view, position, or a belief system. Identifying and framing a narrative that stands behind false information shifts the conversation from “who is saying truth” and “who is saying falsity” to a relationship process and gives space for two opposing stories, viewpoints, standpoints, or mindsets to relate to each other. Moreover, doing so shifts the power from false information or mis/disinformation or propaganda back to a human being who has a potential to see and name these narratives, as well as engage and interact with them—to transform or update them. Thus, a human being steps out of being a victim of false information, and steps into a field of being an active agent for interacting between different stories. As a result of this interaction process between different narratives, viewpoints or mindsets, there is a possibility for better understanding, more flow, new ideas and solutions in relationships.

During the second focus group discussion one participant represented a side, I call it a role, that justified lies to win the war. He said,

Well, you know what, we are in war, and the final and ultimate goal is to win that war. Whatever serves that goal, works. So, if I need to lie in order to raise the morale of my soldiers, I will do it. If I have to lie in order to bring up my reputation, so that I can get support from the countries that I have alliance with, I will do that. That is my ultimate goal. So, I do not bother about being truthful or not. We are in war.

As we deepened this role, the group found a bigger story behind it about “good vs. evil.” One participant said that it might be thousands of years old. It was invisible yet present. It had a non-human form yet could be recognized in the mindsets of some people, nations, and countries. During the focus group discussion, this role or position was given a voice through several participants who represented it so well. Below is part of the discussion that highlighted the process of deepening that role, finding a story behind it, interacting with it and as a result, transforming it.

Participant Z said:

I was having a reflection to what [the first participant’s name] was saying in the beginning. What is the truth of the lie, the bigger arch of story—is it life or winning the war? What is the purpose we are trying to communicate ... [I want to bring] two points: what is the larger arch (bigger story) that the lie is part of? Resistance or saving my own life or winning the war? Another one: the effect of the lie, and the lie is more effective when it is build on partial truth.

Participant A said in response to Participant Z:

My lie is better than your lie. I 100% believe in my lie: you are fascist, and you are a complete evil, and we are the perfect people bringing happiness to the world. We have to kill you, and it is our true story 100%, and if your lie is just 10%, you are done because you are not admitting it. The essence of my role is that it is not just a lie; it is a belief, and I have no doubts about my belief; I don’t care if it is a lie or not; it makes me so powerful that I will fight to death for my truth.

Participant B continued:

I would even say: yeah, you are right, I’m extremely powerful, I’m not even a person. I’m not even a politician, I’m not even a country. I’m a grand narrative, of good vs. evil, of the final ultimate battle for the survival of the world, and salvation. All of you believe me in some way. All of you are longing for me, and I will use any word, any smallest action you take to put it into this grand narrative. And you will surrender to me. A national scientific

strive for truth and objective truth is nothing, I'm thousand years older than your research, and truth and objection. I'm in your psyche, in your DNA, in your blood, all of you.

In response to that position came the role of a human being who had feelings and doubts and who stood powerfully in relation to a position of the “grand narrative” as Participant B named it.

Participant C answered:

I get so angry. You are a narrative, but you are not a human [being]. You are just a narrative; you are not a human [being]. To a human being, it belongs to a thought of doubt. I believe that doubt belongs to humans, and you are just a narrative. That is not the same. A human [being] is not a narrative; a human [being] is a human [being]. A human [being] is convinced sometimes but also doubtful. The doubt belongs to us humans, in my mind. I get so angry about that.

As a brief reflection of the above interaction among participants, there was a realization that being humane with all the imperfections might probably be the only way to stand against open lies. Moreover, in this moment of standing for their own imperfections (doubts and natural splits), a human being got his/her own power back instead of being powerless in the face of open lies. Participant B shared with Participant C:

I was deeply impressed by the voice that you expressed, Participant C. When you said that, I felt you were powerful enough, and you even put me back in my place. Like I felt your dignity of being humane and for being able to doubt.

The interaction above was an example on how finding a story behind open lies of one side allowed one to frame it and interact with it. It also showed how bringing one's doubts, fears, and feelings is a powerful position to stand in front of lies. In the actual human interaction, when one can access the personal experience, falsity or propaganda or open lies are no longer so powerful. Or in other words, it is no longer a point, as there was a relationship process between different people that represented different positions or viewpoints—to engage and interact with, that allowed more flow in a conversation.

Interestingly, it was people who were able to represent and bring a voice of the “grand narrative” as one participant named it, or a story behind open lies, as it could not do it itself. Moreover, it was people who brought awareness that some stories got old and outdated or would die soon as they came and would go, however omnipresent and timeless they might seem at the moment. Participant D said:

I’m very proud to be doubtful. It is humane, and it is also how we develop; we progress by doubts and thinking about doubting old beliefs and thinking about new beliefs; that is how we grow as a human race. Your voice is strong and powerful, but you’re going to die soon (laughter); you are not going to develop; you are getting old, and you will die, and we, people who doubt, will go forward.

After the realization that some stories behind open lies and falsity had a beginning and an ending, something happened in a group. There was a new perspective with power shifting from falsity and their narratives to a human being, who could not only see and name these narratives, give them voice and frame them so well, but also potentially transform, as some came to an end and might die soon. For example, a narrative of “good vs. evil” mentioned in the quotes and interaction above, or a narrative of “occupation” that participants mentioned in the beginning and that is still present in many different forms nowadays, or an existential war principle: “In order for me to live, you need to die,” or as one participant noticed, the principles of trust between each other, Geneva Convention, the rules of war after the World War II—these are the narratives that no longer work. The group noticed that we, people, had the power to transform these narratives and bring changes before they would die naturally through destruction, disasters, and wars on this planet. A position of “I see and know you; you are the old narrative” from a human being was quite powerful, putting one on par with the narrative (and not a victim of it), to be able to see it, engage and interact with it, and by way of doing it—transform it.

In it lies the power of a human being that comes with the mindset: “Oh, I know this narrative; it is old and needs to be updated,” thus making a narrative less powerful and a human being more powerful, who can deal with it, change it and transform it by noticing it, framing it, standing up to it and interacting with it.

One example of how to transform one of such narratives and belief systems, “we are good vs. you are evil,” was brought during a focus group discussion, with a fantastic intervention from one of the participants who picked up the side of “the evil,” brought life and feelings to it, changing the atmosphere between two sides and creating a moment of connection in the group. I highlight this part of the discussion below.

Participant E said:

I would like to try something. I want to try answering to Participant A and Participant B. You were both saying that I’m evil and I’m fascist. And I want to say: that is true. I am the evil. I’m just pretending that I’m better than you, but I’m not. I’m lying about it, I’m lying about democracy and peace, I’ve never considered you as someone important to relate with. I’ve never thought you were valuable, and now I see your strength, and I get the point here. I’ve never seen it enough, probably, and now I’m in big trouble here.

Participant A said:

Thank you for saying that. At least seeing me for a little bit. The way you try to relate to me—makes me interested in communication. It makes me aware that communication is important, and I would like to hold on and speak to you.

Participant E said:

I always looked down on you, I see that. It was a mistake.

Participant A said:

Thank you. Now I feel you see my strength and recognize it, and I actually see how powerful I am, and it makes me a little more humane. I don’t want to use my power to kill everybody on this planet. I just like some relationship to be seen and communicate with you.

Participant E said:

I think that I missed so much. I missed the opportunity to get to know you. It was stupid from my side. And now I'm forced to because of the situation. You forced me to get to know you better.

After a while, participant A noticed that this conversation was “evolutionizing” propaganda, as it vanished in the face of people being humane. He said,

Propaganda is happening when we don't want to communicate. When there is communication, there is no propaganda, but the interest to hear each other; and when you don't believe you will be heard, you use propaganda and make it better with every interaction.

Indeed, the ability to pick up “the evil” side, humanize it, bring life to it or unfold it to see a human being behind it, changed the atmosphere and created a new space for possible new steps forward and relationships. In this case, there was more understanding and connection, as some participants felt, between the Western and the Eastern worlds.

In the reflection phase of a discussion, one participant noticed that there was a relational dimension of the topic of falsity. It brings me to the second theme of my research findings about relationships, supporting the argument that behind falsity, there may be an unresolved relationship aspect between different and opposing views or belief systems or levels (self and the other).

Theme #2: Falsity as Evidence of an Unresolved Dilemma

Behind falsity there is a relationship field and connected to it a common human tendency to avoid conflicts. Behind falsity there are unresolved relationship issues between different and opposing viewpoints or belief systems. Falsity may be a product of an unresolved essential tension about “How to be the self and stay in relationship to others and the world.”

Self-reflecting and working on this question individually and/or as a group of people, processing existing splits and polarities, can be one of the many ways to hold different viewpoints and find new ways of interpreting, which can be an alternative strategy of dealing with false information.

Thus, false information may not be an absolute evil, but a sign about a need for better relationships between polarities, different viewpoints, and belief systems. In other words, false information can be used as a fuel for greater polarization, distancing, splits in society and violence, or, reversely, for better relationships and community building.

During the first focus group discussion it turned out that people tended to create falsity as a way to avoid conflicts, and with it avoid hurting others, and destroying relationships—to protect the self, the other, and relationships. As a mirroring effect, some participants mentioned that they did not confront the falsity that others shared because of the very same reasons. One participant said, “When somebody is saying something false, I know it, but I feel that if I tell something truthful, it will be hurtful, or it will break something.” The same participant noticed,

If somebody asks a question, I am in the midst of a hotspot, as I must say exactly something that will start a conflict, and it requires a lot of thinking [within a short period of time]. So, I am in a big tension here, that is why I am saying something false.

Another participant shared a story about her lying about her relationship status, as there were social norms that created pressure for her. Even though she was single, she might say she was married. She added, “Sometimes I would like to be more honest and vulnerable and quit all my lies. But I find myself lying like a Pinocchio for some years ... I feel it is embarrassing.” From the focus group discussion, it appeared that people were willing to accept and not challenge falsity due to a high invisible pressure of providing one simple answer to a complex situation, given the limited time and desire to uphold social norms. In other words, falsity was viewed as an ultimate relief from all these pressures and dilemmas in the moment.

Analyzing the above aspect of my second theme, I realize that there is a common unspoken yet self-explicit narrative in the background that may sound like this: conflicts are bad; they destroy relationships, so lying may be one of the ways to avoid them. In

support of this narrative, one participant framed her sub-topic as the following, “Conflicts vs. Relationships,” thus putting conflicts in contra to relationships. As a researcher, I see that what is missing on the other side in society at large is another type of narrative that shows how conflicts are an inevitable part of relationships and how going through them could clarify and potentially deepen relationships, allowing an individual, a couple, or a group to grow. On top of it, not telling anything or telling lies is a hidden conflict already, which is impossible to avoid, as one is already in the middle of it. In other words, it is not possible to avoid conflicts, and there is only one way—to go in and through them. In addition, silencing or avoiding conflicts may hurt the other and the relationship even harder in the long run than an open conflict. Thus, I come to the conclusion that relating to a narrative (or worldview) on conflicts that destroy relationships may be an alternative way to address falsities instead of fighting them. To do so, there could be stories and examples of how going openly through conflicts may give new possibilities for the self and the other and provide, paradoxically, greater security to the relationship, as hurting another with an awareness may bring more openness and flow into communication, eventually creating a true relief. But to go for and through conflicts, one may need some innate talent or knowledge, skills, and ongoing practice, as there is no single fixed solution for relationships and conflicts. It leads me to a second crucial finding within this theme of my research, which strikes and touches me at the same time.

In addition to avoiding conflicts, participants mentioned that behind falsity there was an unresolved question through different contexts: how to be yourself and stay in a relationship—to opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger forces like government laws, and countries with greater powers? It became an underlying question of the

first focus group discussion, with people sharing stories on how they faced it and tried to answer it on a personal, family, community, as well as national and global levels.

Below I share some stories told by the participants of the first focus group discussion that touch different levels, personal and collective. I do it to highlight the importance of the question “how to be yourself and stay in a relationship” that can possibly drive creating and spreading of falsity. I also illustrate how people faced this complex and irreconcilable dilemma of how to be the self and relate to others in their lives. In my analysis of these stories that follows, I already use findings from the first theme, trying to identify narratives behind “false” stories (visible or hidden) as a beginning step to give space to different, opposing stories and interact with them. Thus, I draw a link between the first and the second themes, claiming that they are interconnected, not necessarily in a linear way. Finding a narrative behind falsity shifts a conversation from facts to interaction and brings more flow, while working on a dilemma of how to be the self and stay in relationships to other viewpoints, brings more flow into communication. For this, it may be helpful to frame different stories behind “true” beliefs of the self and “false” beliefs of others and relate to them in order to look for possible solutions. In a way, narratives behind falsity point to the direction of relationships, and working on the unresolved dilemma of being the self and staying in relationships with others, finding narratives of both positions and interacting with them impacts falsity, its creation and spreading. Both themes indicate alternative ways of dealing with falsity.

One participant from Western Europe shared her personal story on how in childhood, her mother created rules to always be a happy family for the outside world and to never share difficulties and issues happening inside the family to the outside audience. The participant said:

So, she [mother] asked this kind of loyalty. If not, I would not be loved in a way. So, there was a lot of emotional pressure. And at [a] certain point, me also did not know

anymore what was true, what was not.

When that person became an adult, she broke the relationship with her mother, eventually following herself and not the family rules set by her mother. Another participant from East Africa shared how, in his community, a man could not marry if he was not circumcised. In this case, a woman, be it an aunt or a grandmother, could come, remove the underwear, and beat this man so that a man could not have children and end up having a miserable life. The participant shared his view and path that turned out to be a response:

I would like to be in a relationship [to traditions] and be myself. Why do you want to tell me what you want [me] to do? I don't need it; I just want to be me by giving me the freedom to do what I want. I don't want to follow your dream; I want to pursue my dream.

This participant did follow his dream, and, as a result, he shared his story with the focus group.

Another participant from Eastern Europe shared a story about how her grandmother never said what she felt to her husband, and it became a family tradition. She said,

My mother did the same, it is a tradition in our family not to say what I really feel ... But it is painful. My high dream here is to start talking ... not just close yourself and do not pay attention to something that is happening.

It is interesting that one participant from Western Europe shared that she had two high dreams, in other words, ideal vision of life or the world, and she did it in different parts of the discussion.

Initially, she said, "If I really love the relationship, I will do whatever is needed to keep the relationship, despite we have different opinions. I will do my best; I love it; this is my high dream for relationships." After a while, she added,

I just realize that my high dream is [to] follow myself, despite traditions, or what society says that I have to [do]. For me it is really difficult to quit the critic that I project outside. My tendency is to relate [to] what they think, and I keep my opinions to myself, not to be criticized. Follow my opinion, and do not be so attached to what other people are saying. Quit relationship with inner critics.

Interestingly, in different moments during the discussion, this participant shared her inner search to find her unique way and answer to how to be the self and stay in relationship, which was mentioned as a core question behind falsity.

Yet another participant from East Asia¹ mentioned how she struggled to live in a country with a government law forbidding free speech. As a result, she shared a story of how one woman who allowed herself to express herself was sentenced to jail for several years. That participant shared her helplessness on how to be herself, support what she believed in, and follow the law. She shared her inner struggles,

For me, in my context, I'm scared to go [and speak freely]. Because I don't trust if I go to that spot, other people will save me. So, that is a dilemma for me. Because I then do not trust other people. I'm not the one to be trusted also, because I'm afraid to go. And I don't want to be like this. But it is so scary. Because many people want to, and there is a law, there is a structure [that you cannot speak freely], it is not a personal relationship. It is very intense. If I stay here and do not do anything, I'm a part of the problem. And people who are fighting, they sacrifice themselves. But I'm still afraid. It is very difficult.

One participant from Oceania shared how it was nearly impossible not to shut down and distance from the opposing viewpoint, being in a relationship with another person who was coming from another side in the context of the war in the Middle East. She said,

I would love to know how to better to navigate personal relationships when each person has a completely opposite view of what is going on in a particular global or political or social context that we are both very involved in from different viewpoints.

Another participant from Eastern Europe shared how, on his personal level, he suffered from the global powers misrepresenting what was going on in his country, in the war zone, and how it was

¹ It is important to mention and acknowledge the differences of norms and values when it comes down to a discussion in a multinational group, and how diverse cultures view and address tensions and conflicts. In certain cultures, conflicts are more tolerated than in other cultures, because of many reasons. As I was facilitating a focus group discussion, I was in a role of a learner, following participants and bringing awareness about our diversity.

the engine for actions or non-actions to support his country, and it could be a matter of life and death for people.

All the above stories on personal, family, community, group, national, and global levels that participants shared during the first focus group discussion highlight the inner struggles framed by the question on the background about how to be yourself and stay in a relationship with the opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger forces like government laws, countries with greater powers. These stories indicate the complexity of being in front of this question and how there is no single and right answer, but each person searches his/her unique way that can be context dependent, given certain time, location, culture, and one's personal life path.

The above stories that participants shared also indicate, in most cases, that in a current global social context, there is an unspoken narrative: one has to choose either to follow the self or to follow the rules, family values, social norms, state laws, or a global game. Such a narrative with the inner debate is reflected in a story from the participant from Western Europe that I mentioned above and how she shares that she struggles to uphold social norms, remain herself, and not lie about her relationship status and that she is tired of lying “like Pinocchio,” and she would like to quit, and then she had to choose. So, in most cases, there is a narrative behind, stating that one has to choose one way or another, and there is no other option. However, it sounds like an outdated narrative. And there is rarely a narrative with stories and examples on how one manages to hold both and find his/her own way as a human being in each particular situation.

However, the question itself is amazing: How to be yourself and stay in a relationship—to opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger

forces like government laws, and countries with greater powers? Because it has the capacity to (a) understand a person and his/her/their difficult spot with no one simple answer; (b) outline the existing conflict; (c) hold both polarities and opposites—being yourself and staying in the relationship, and thus in a way, facilitate the process of finding a solution for each individual and in each particular situation.

I find the question that the focus group came up with fascinating. Because it could be yet another alternative way to deal with falsity, finding what it means for one to be true to the self and to stay in relation to other viewpoints, traditions, and cultural, social, and political norms. There is an insight: if people would know the answer to the above question, or there would be a simple answer, or people would not live in relationships with others, but on their own, maybe there would be no falsity whatsoever. In other words, difficulty in being the self and staying in relation to others is a producer of false information. At the same time, reversely, falsity may be “a door” to such a question, to the relationships process, and to the process of researching the own answer to a deeper question (or one of the questions) underneath, and the own learning and development. Or at least, people who ask themselves this question may become more aware of different parts and bring them into an interaction with the other, with the group, community, or with the world.

One of the key moments in a focus group discussion and an example of how to do it came from the participant from East Asia. Reflecting on this question, how she could be herself and in relation to the existing situation with free speech and lack of it in a country, she came up with her own solution: “So, maybe I could talk more to other people who are also scared. Maybe it gives more trust with other people around. Yeah.” Such an answer can possibly be one of the examples of how it is possible to integrate both sides: being true to the self and staying in relation to others

and the bigger context. However, it was not a mechanical answer; it is an answer that emerged from feeling. The focus group was touched by it, and one participant framed a momentary resolution, “[Then it comes down not about] the validity [of information], false or true, but how we feel about it.” So, feeling the self, and the own helplessness, and bringing it in, could become a way to create relationships. It allowed one to stay true to the self in the face of bigger forces one could not overcome or change.

Research Question #2. What Allows an Individual or a Group of People to Open up to Seemingly Impossible False Beliefs?

Theme #3: Human experience and capacity to hold polarities is crucial

There is a high demand for a humane capacity—a talent or skill—to be open to different stories and to hold both polarities at the same time to allow an interaction between them to happen. In other words, there is need in human experience and skills to see, name and address narratives behind false information. During all three focus group discussions, I observed a need to have people who can express their personal experiences and feelings, doubts and imperfections, and who, paradoxically, do not doubt their own power in the face of false information and, propaganda. Those people have a capacity to hold complexity and different perspectives; they can feel into one or both sides, access and bring his/her feelings and personal experience in the midst of the world stage—to allow the interaction between different narratives to happen and find ways for better relationships. Moreover, answering my second question, it may be humane not to be open to another’s “false beliefs.” In this case, one should not be forced to do so or be politically correct about it and pretend to be doing so while he or she cannot. But instead, one can go even deeper inside and find the own “truth” and ask outer support to have an outside friend, an observer or a facilitator who has an innate talent or a skill to hold and feel into

both polarities at the same time, to facilitate the interaction, and the relationship process behind falsity.

Even though the third focus group discussion highlighted all three themes, it answered my second research question: What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs? As it turned out, the point was not to be merely open to another's false belief (in this case—generalization according to one's nationality), but to be able to understand what it did to the self, feel into it, and bring it up, given the complexity of different contexts and social positions that each side was carrying. Openness per se was not the point. The point was to be humane, and to have someone who could be open, and it could be someone from the outside, a facilitator, a friend, or a supporter with the innate ability and skills to be naturally and emotionally (not technically) open to both sides. Having an outside or inner observer and a friend to feel into and understand one or both positions better turned out to be crucial to address and relate to the opposite viewpoint.

The third group discussion focused primarily on a relationship issue between two people and two positions who are friends from countries that are at war with each other: Ukraine and Russia. Both sides openly accused each other of generalizing and saying “falsity” about the self, according to one's nationality, for example: “all Russians are this and that” or “all Ukrainians do this or that.” Direct interaction around existing issues and tensions became important for each side to share and listen instead of being silent and distancing. It belongs to the conflict resolution skills: noticing a conflict and being open to work on it. Even though it was difficult and painful for each side to hear the accusations from another, it turned out that direct interaction brought relief at the same time, as it allowed to bring light and understand what was happening on the other side and what was there to address.

In the course of a discussion, one side asked another to be more humane and to be more sensitive to the other, seeing one not only in a social position and a role of nationality but as a human being. For one side, it would mean being more sensitive and seeing a human being on the other side instead of nationality. For the other side, it would mean—to be able to bring their own pain so that the other could see there is a human being on this side. As it turned out, it was difficult to share the pain—for the Ukrainian participant, not to make a friend guilty, and for the Russian participant, not to add pain to the Ukrainian friend, coming from the side of an oppressor. How do you feel and show your own pain in a tough spot and not make another guilty, and how do you feel and show your own pain in a tough spot, being originally from the side or country that is the oppressor?—these were the unspoken questions on both sides. They echoed the question about how to be the self and relate to the other from the first focus group discussion. As a result of not knowing “how” from both sides, “falsities” or, in this case, generalizations and categorizations appeared.

To analyze closely, one side had a narrative: I cannot show my pain because I fear I will make the other one guilty because it is the other one’s fault from their side somehow, or the other belongs to that side. Or I think I cannot afford to feel anything because I am under attack, and I have to stay strong. Another side had a narrative: I cannot show my pain to the other because I belong to the side of an oppressor, and I have it good and should not show my pain because it is obscene. These invisible narratives on the background created difficulties (or, in ProcessWork, we call edges, thresholds that one cannot cross because of some fears or something that stops one from doing so), so that two sides could no longer interact with each other. When these narratives were brought in, and one side, the Ukrainian participant, said, responding to the unspoken narrative, that it was important for her to see the pain on the other side, as it was real, and the

pain was the pain, she knew it so well, so showing the pain allowed her to see and feel the other, and a new space and a momentary connection between two sides emerged. I bring a part of the interaction from a discussion to illustrate this point:

Participant of Russian origin said:

I cannot do that [reveal what I feel] because I cannot allow myself to reveal it. That is the problem.

Participant of Ukrainian origin said:

I have to say, when I feel and know it, it changes me ... because there is you, there is me, there is pain. I forget about other things. I see you, and it is important to see how you are in pain. But then I can see it. I cannot understand probably fully, but I see it.

Participant of Russian origin said:

Can you say—why it is important to see? Because I always think that this is something I should not reveal. I should not ... because of ... I'm not in a position to complain to you. Because I understand how much pain you have. And I would not like to put my stuff on you.

Participant of Ukrainian origin said:

I did not feel it like complain, and you put it on myself. I felt that—you feel pain, I feel pain, we are connected, however strange it is. It would be great to connect through other things, [like] joy, [for example].

Facilitator said:

You became emotional. Do you know what is that?

Participant of Ukrainian origin said (touched and crying):

Yeah, because I know what pain is. I know it, and I feel you better when I see it. I do not know—maybe different content, but it does not matter. Pain is pain. It is good to see your pain; it is not for me to resolve, and I cannot. But I can see it, and I can feel you. And that makes me more sensitive. It is hard to be showing the pain. Because I think—yeah, [I] will cry and you will feel guilty or what? Generalizing [for me] is the way to cover pain rather than reveal it. To stay more formal and neutral. You know. Not showing feelings—was my protection. Generalization rather than sharing my pain. I do not show pain because I care, you will feel guilty, and you are not guilty, and you take responsibility, and it is too much. It is hard to share pain when we are on different sides.

Participant of Russian origin said:

It is easy to share now because before, I could not understand myself, and now I understand what was happening to me ... it took time to understand myself really ... I remember I categorized, because I was afraid to say about my pain and be personal.

Participant of Ukrainian origin said:

For me, not showing pain publicly was a survival issue. I was trying to handle it and understand when there is a right moment, and now is the right moment. I'm learning how to be in pain, and show pain, and publicly, in friendship, in relationships, especially that we still—how to be together as friends ... but it is a hope for me if we can make it. Our relationship is a big hope to me.

Participant of Russian origin said:

For me, too, a big hope. Not only hope, it is happening, and something that I hold on to. When I thought: the world is in a completely mass, I thought that I have you.

Participant of Ukrainian origin said:

Can we still be friends in this division, split, and war? Yeah ... now I'm more aware of pain, my pain, and also your pain, and ... The pain on the other side, I will be more aware of it. It will make me more sensitive. It is huge: generations of my people—covered the pain to go on and to survive. Now I see this is the only way, basically, [to learn to feel and express the pain].

In the end, both participants thanked each other and framed that they became more aware of their “generalization” and thanked for a chance to go deeper into the relationships and understand each side and a common difficulty (although with different contexts) a bit more. Basically, both sides were on the same side—of humanity, of learning to feel and show their own pain, and to be more specific and less general, in other words—to be the self and in relation to another, being from different countries that are at war with each other.

One of the turning moments in the whole discussion was the fact that there was someone in the room (in this case—the facilitator or the observer), who could not only see and talk about pain but who could feel the pain of the participant with a Russian origin. Here is a part of the conversation that came prior to the interaction above:

Facilitator said:

I realize [I] understand what you say. You, as [name], as an individual, are carrying all the bad feelings, burdening yourself. And you would like [name of another side], your friend, to see how much you are carrying every day, and how sensitive and good you are. It is really touching. You want to be seen by her.

Participant of Russian origin said:

I got myself, thank you.

The fact that there was someone who could feel the pain of a person shifted the atmosphere and allowed further interaction to happen. The participant of a Russian origin eventually said, “It is easy to share now because before I could not understand myself, and now I understand what was happening to me ... it took time to understand myself really.” As if—feeling the pain on the own, was nearly impossible, but having someone who could do it, allowed us to share the pain and for another side to feel it too. It brought some momentary feeling of connection.

To sum up, the discussion was a call to be humane, even in the midst of an impossible war context, to see there was a human being on the other side, which made two friends coming from two warring countries, being on one side, really. On the side of humanity that stood in front of big forces, open lies, inhumane machines. A call for being humane seemed to be a powerful and maybe the only way to address “falsity.” Being humane meant that it was ok and natural to be “not open” to the other. It was normal and important, especially if it was a phase, not a final destination. Because in this position of being “not open” to another, an individual or a group of people could become more open to the self, feel and understand his/her own position. As the focus group discussion showed, sometimes, having a facilitator or a friend nearby could help to reflect and get deeper insights about the other side. Then, it could naturally become the beginning of opening up to another side. The point is not to be open to another but to have someone who can do so, understand, frame, hold both polarities, and allow interaction between

them. It could be some innate qualities inside a person, or as a result of one's inner work, or it could be a question or an outside person like a facilitator, but these qualities may be essential. As the third focus group discussion shows, if there is someone who deeply feels and understands one or two sides, with support and openness for both, it may be shifting for the whole relationship process, transforming falsities into soil for mutual learning and growth for the self and how to be in relationship with the other.

Discussion

There are two themes that provide an answer to my first research question: "How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?" The first theme is about each falsity containing a narrative that one can look for, frame and eventually interact with to bring more understanding or at least more flow between different stories, viewpoints, or worldviews. As a result, it allows one to move conversations (or distancing and greater polarization) from facts to more interaction. In one of the focus group discussions, the position that generated and spread open lies in times of war (no matter who were the exact people, it is an overarching role that is present all over the world—from the countries' leaders to the family situations) was deepened by the participants—to reveal a story, or how the group named it, a "grand narrative" behind it, of good vs. evil. This story of good and evil that obviously comes through the many fairy tales, seats deeply in us, and seems to be a driving force of actions and non-actions, including open lies in times of war. Yet, such a story seems to be old, and needs to be updated, as the world is more complex and nuanced than good and evil. So, naming this narrative and framing it was powerful per se because it allowed the narrative to move from the realm of invisible omnipotent driving force to a visible form—for people to see, engage and interact with it. Moreover, it allowed a

shift of power, from open lies to a human being who was standing in front of this “grand narrative” and reclaiming the own power of doubt that belonged to a human soul, and allowed the humankind to progress, while the “grand narrative” would die sooner or later. In other words, seeing and identifying the narrative that stands behind falsity is empowering. It brings the power back from lies and falsities (or generalizations, silences, misconceptions, and incomplete information to name a few) that seem to be unwinning, to a human being, who has a capacity to doubt, see, name, frame, relate to, and transform it.

Interestingly, I found that there were some unspoken narratives that motivated choices about creating and spreading falsities. For example, one narrative was about conflicts being bad, hurting others, and destroying relationships, so lying or silencing and distancing was a way to avoid conflicts, for some good reasons. However, in my writing analysis process another unspoken narrative was revealed to respond to the original one. The other narrative was about conflicts being an inevitable part of relationships, serving to deepen relationships, and how, in fact, it was not possible to avoid conflicts, even if one tried to ignore it, or silence, it was already happening. Out of this interaction between two different narratives or viewpoints during my analysis process, I came up with an alternative strategy to fighting falsity that could be relevant on a personal, family, school education, business, and/or country levels: promoting a culture of conflict with concrete working examples of how they could bring learnings and sustainable solutions for all sides.

The second theme of my research shows that behind false information there may be an unresolved relationship issue, with a core dilemma: “How to be yourself and stay in a relationship with opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger forces like government laws, countries with greater powers?” It is interesting to notice that

during a discussion around this question, there were stories that showed the complexity of it, and how it was nearly impossible to follow both, the self and others at the same time. So, most often, one had to choose—either to follow the self or to follow the rules, family values, social norms, state laws, or a global game. However, in my analysis process I indicate that the question itself—“How to be yourself and stay in a relationship—to opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger forces like government laws, countries with greater powers?”—those participants posed, was inadvertently trying to find the way on how to be both—true to the self and stay in relationships. In this way, the question was facilitating the process of finding ways to integrate both—the self and the other, the self and traditions, the self and the family, the self and society, the self and the state, to name a few. Addressing such a dilemma means addressing falsity or making it even unnecessary. To confirm this, one participant noticed,

Propaganda is happening when we don't want to communicate. When there is communication, there is no propaganda, but the interest to hear each other; and when you don't believe you will be heard, you use propaganda and make it better with every interaction.

Thus, moving into the relationship realm makes falsity or propaganda irrelevant.

Connecting the first and second themes, I shared stories of some participants highlighting complexity of finding a simple and fixed answer to the dilemma above. Each story can be a subject for further research. But, in my writing analysis process, I hypothesize that in a story about men being circumscribed and beaten by the aunt or grandmother, there could be a story on how women were trying to preserve a way for new generations, and beating uncircumcised men up may be basically going against this wish, and how understanding it could possibly find the way to relate to it, or in this case—update the practice, reminding of an underlying story and deep values behind. Or in a story about older generations of mothers not sharing the feelings may

be a story of oppression, and how not revealing feelings might be a survival behavior, and how it could be brought in awareness as time changes. Or in a story where a mother was requiring kids to show how the family was doing good to the outside world, there is a story about social norms and pressure and how kids and the mother could team up to respond to these social norms together, and not be split among each other. These are the beginning thoughts—to find a storyline in each situation and bring more understanding, which may allow to shift the conversation from who is right or wrong, or which way to choose to follow, to a deeper relationship—between two viewpoints and people representing them, and potentially news ways that would integrate the interests of the self and the world. The question “How to be yourself and stay in a relationship—to opposite viewpoints, traditional taboos, social norms, family values, bigger forces like government laws, countries with greater powers?” in itself facilitates the process of finding such new ways.

The concepts of “being yourself” or “staying true to yourself” are big concepts and may take separate studies and a lifetime to understand and live it. For example, Said (2024) researches the quest of finding one’s authentic self and how it is a fluid concept as the self is always evolving in relation to a given context that is constantly in flux (pp. 5–6). On top of it, there is a relationship aspect, on how to be the authentic self and relate to the family values, traditions, and society at large. So, both aspects—being the self and staying in relation to others—are not trivial ones, and the question itself understands the complexity of a situation and invites an individual or a group of people to find the own unique way. Having more of such examples of people and groups of people navigating and finding the own unique way between following the self and following the family values and traditions and society with conflict resolution work as both directions may often contradict each other, may be an exciting media

project, and an alternative possible solution to address false information. Because, as my study shows, behind falsity there is an unresolved question on how to be the self and relate to others. And false information can be, in a strange way, an invitation to work on the unresolved relationship issues.

The third theme answers my second research question, “What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?” All three focus group discussions showed that human experience, feelings, and human capacity to hold polarities and different stories at the same time was key for dealing with falsity or generalization.

In fact, it was a human being (not technology) who could name, interact with and transform old narratives. I was amazed to witness that whenever a person could access the own intimate experience in the midst of the world stage and brought their feelings, there was a shift of each discussion from a level of “who is saying truth or falsity” to the level of actual human interaction and building new relationships. For example, in one of the focus group discussions, the participant, representing the Western part of the world, found the “evil” side inside herself, saying to the side from the Eastern part of the world,

[T]hat is true. I am the evil. I’m just pretending that I’m better than you, but I’m not. I’m lying about it, I’m lying about democracy and peace, I’ve never considered you as someone important to relate with. I’ve never thought you were valuable, and now I see your strength, and I get the point here. I’ve never seen it enough, probably, and now I’m in big trouble here.

That interaction allowed two sides, initially “the good” and “the evil” to shift from these definitions and go deeper into the relationships. After that, the side of the Eastern world

[Participant A] responded:

Thank you. Now I feel you see my strength and recognize it, and I actually see how powerful I am, and it makes me a little more humane. I don’t want to use my power to kill everybody on this planet. I just like some relationship to be seen and communicate with you.

The above indicated that some new relationships were taking place thanks to the human interaction in the unthinkable situation.

In addition to the above, I find that the formulation of my second question is quite limited. Because one side opening up to another's false belief is not the point. Being closed to another may equally be important and essential, as it means that one is closed to the other, but open to find the own "truth" or position. Finding the own "truth" and bringing that in—may be no less important than being open to other's belief system, as it can equally bring clarity, and thus more flow into interaction between diverse viewpoints. However, what is crucial that my study shows, is in the process of interaction between different views or positions, to have at least one person in a role of an observer, it can be a friend, a facilitator, or a stranger, who at any given moment has a capacity or innate talent to feel into the self, and into each side. The role of an observer can move a discussion from factual information to a feeling realm, which can change the atmosphere and shift the interaction dynamic between two sides and viewpoints. It makes me conclude that one of the essential skills of the 21st century in light of dealing with false claims, in times of greater polarization and distancing, is one's ability to hold and support polarities and different viewpoints that contradict each other, give space for each side to be expressed fully to understand. It may not be easy, as it requires a certain level of detachment. But in addition to that, it needs real interest to support each side instead of driving the own agenda, and practical knowledge that it may be the only way to resolve relationship issues, breaking from the old narrative "If you are not with me, you are against me," which is one of the basic war principles according to Foucault (Bhandaru, 2013) that needs to be updated, so that supporting the other means also supporting the self.

In my personal reflections on what allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs, during my research process, I find that having a detached position is crucial. In the first two focus group discussions I was in a more detached position, and in the third focus group I was one of the sides, and it was not possible to be open to another side, without understanding fully my own side and expressing it. It requires one's innerwork, and often an outside support and a view of an observer, as "observation is a manifestation of an unconscious tendency in us, a tendency in which nature is trying to look at herself" (Arnold Mindell, 2012). Besides, having an outside observer in the third focus group, who genuinely tries to understand both sides with good feelings for both, and who can move from the dimension of facts to the dimension of feelings, shifted the conversation. So, it is an example on how it may not be possible to find a way to hold both stories of "truth" and "falsity" at the same time while staying in a dimension of facts only and not bringing human experience and feelings. One needs to travel to another dimension of feelings and emotions as a human being, to have some light on how to move forward in a conversation and interaction—between different narratives or worldviews. It correlates with a mathematical theorem that says that any knot that cannot be untied in three dimensions can be untied by adding a fourth, $n+1$ (Kaku, 1993). In fact, from this new dimension, hyperspace, the knot is not tangled, so the problem is no longer even a problem. Arnold Mindell (2012) states that "[w]e need hyperspace to solve problems" (p. 325). I believe that applying this knowledge in practice and having more working examples publicly is important, to allow an individual or a group of people to open up to a seemingly impossible false belief by finding the narrative behind and interacting with it, knowing that there potentially be a new way, a perspective or even a solution.

To sum up the answer to my second question, what allows one to open up to another's false claim is the following: one's detached position or a presence of an observer; one's innerwork; genuine interest in the narratives of both sides, however true or false; working real-time examples on how it is possible to move in between dimensions of facts and feelings and bringing more flow in a conversation. In this way, insights and knowledge from modern physics may also be useful, but most importantly a mindset of a researcher who may not know an immediate answer, but is willing to research and look for a narrative behind falsity to engage and interact with, taking into account all the complexity of a given situation and bringing the own experience into it.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

My research sought to find alternative ways of dealing with false information than dominant strategies of combatting it directly. My findings show that seeing a narrative behind falsity shifts the conversation from the terrain of facts and fighting about who is right or wrong, true or false, to a relationship field. It creates a space where different polar viewpoints can possibly meet each other, and relate, or at least give one a possibility to understand the other's worldview a little bit better to allow more flow in communication between different stories and belief systems. My findings highlight the direct link between false information and relationships. As one focus group participant put it clearly, "Propaganda is happening when we don't want to communicate. When there is communication, there is no propaganda, but the interest to hear each other." Conversely, falsity can be a sign that there is an unresolved relationship aspect in the background.

In addition, my findings show that an ability to see and name the narratives behind false information empowers people to shift from a position of being a victim of propaganda to a position of an agent who engages and interacts with different narratives, and thus is able to transform or update those stories that have become old or irrelevant to current times, contexts, and locations. For that, we may need human experience and feelings, and one's capacity to hold different and often contradicting viewpoints simultaneously, advancing in conflict resolutions skills that improve relationships. Doing so provides an alternative way to address the phenomenon of false information in our times. In other words, an ability to see and name the narratives behind false information makes it possible to engage and interact with others as a human being. It also allows us to learn conflict resolution and advance in relationships, which is crucial to address the phenomenon of false information in our times.

These findings add to existing scholarship on false information that has grown exponentially during the last decade and can be useful in situations when strategies aimed at fighting false beliefs no longer work, or even backfire, producing greater distancing, silencing, and closure, and thus creating a ground for even more falsity (Lazer et al., 2018).

This final chapter includes a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of how the key findings relate to the existing literature, and my contributions. After that, I suggest implications that my findings bring, and outline limitations and recommendations for future research. I end this chapter with concluding comments.

Summary of the Study

My research sought to address four gaps that I found in the area of dealing with false information in the 21st century. These are the following: (a) false information is mainly seen as pathology, with black and white colors, and there is no research that sees false information as potentially meaningful and discovers its complexity; (b) as a result, most strategies to deal with false news are aimed at fighting it, while I consider fighting is but one strategy that is quite limited when it comes down to relationships and collaboration; (c) beyond the levels of facts, there is another, subjective level, with one's belief systems being the core factor in identifying, creating and spreading false information, so that information may be true if it is in line with one's belief systems and false if it is not; the limitation of this finding lies in the area of applicability, I have not seen any practical way of working on finding core belief systems in relation to false news; and (d) as of now most solutions to address false information are technological, while I wish to explore the extent to which human interventions may be the main ones, or an inevitable part for technological solutions.

In other words, I was looking for an alternative to fighting strategies for addressing false information and belief systems that stand behind it, believing that the power of human beings in existing scholarship is underestimated. So, I was also looking for human-based solutions in addition to technological ones.

The project was guided by two research questions:

1. How can revealing and understanding narratives behind false claims impact the relationships with diverse and opposing viewpoints?
2. What allows an individual or a group of people to open up to seemingly impossible false beliefs?

In order to answer these questions, I used a qualitative research methodology and organized three focus groups over Zoom on topics that contain false information, false claims, lies, one-sidedness, narrow-mindedness, or generalizations and thus are treated as false for one of the sides. Two focus group discussions were held on a group level, recruiting participants from the global community, and the third group focused on the relationship between two people facing tension and distancing during times of war, being initially from Russia and from Ukraine. So, my research covered both group and personal relationship levels.

My research design and analysis processes were guided by the ProcessWork awareness-based paradigm and conflict resolution method for individuals, relationships, and groups of people that see every interaction as a field with certain sides and positions that have polarities, both mainstream and marginal voices, as well as an organizing principle on the background: to reveal and bring in. In addition, I analyzed my data narratively and crafted stories (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 826) that are explicitly talked about or implicitly mentioned to relate and interact with them.

Below are my research findings framed as three key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and my analysis. The first two themes answer my first research question, and the third theme gives an initial answer to my second research question.

Theme #1: Finding the narrative behind falsity. Finding a narrative behind falsity allows us to move from facts to interaction, and empowers people to see, frame and engage with another story, view, position, or a belief system.

Theme #2: Falsity as evidence of an unresolved dilemma.

Behind falsity there is a relationship field, and connected to it, a common tendency to avoid conflicts. Behind falsity there are unresolved relationship issues between different and opposing viewpoints or belief systems. Thus, falsity can be a sign that there is a possible split, a dilemma and a tension around how to be the self and stay in relationships.

Theme #3: Human experience and capacity to hold polarities is crucial. There is a high demand for a humane capacity, a talent and a skill to be open to different stories and hold both polarities at the same time to allow an interaction between them to happen.

Significance of Findings and Contribution

Referring back to my literature review, I have not found anything about relationships, including tensions and conflicts, and direct or indirect link between relationships and false information, in existing studies. My major contribution to the area of false information is that there is a relationships field behind falsity, and that looking for narratives behind false information can be a way to access this subjective level of reality with different stories, perceptions and worldviews, and give space and empower people to interact with these different and opposing stories, and possibly find new perspectives or solutions or understandings about these stories.

My study is an effort to fill this gap in current research. First, I wanted to research if false information could be not only a disease, a malaise, a pathology, a disaster, an infodemic, and a tragedy of our times (Aral, 2020; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Fox, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Maseri et al., 2020), but also an opportunity for us as humanity with some meaning and seeds for changes. Second, I wanted to study if there were alternative strategies, in addition to fighting false information aimed to combat propaganda and stop fake news, fix and control it, and find countermeasures (Grinberg et al., 2019; Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Third, I wanted to research false information beyond the realm of objective facts, “true and false” and find out how we can move to another, more subjective dimension through identifying, framing, understanding and relating to a belief system and a mindset that stands behind falsity. I also wanted to study how one can try to relate to falsity without denying it first-place, or trying to fix and change it, as it is part of an individual or a group’s identity (Rabb et al., 2022). Fourth, I was searching for solutions that were not technology-based, as today most solutions (92%) to address false information are technological (Maseri et al., 2020, p. 92940). Instead, I wanted to research human interventions in addition to technological ones. I think empowering human beings in the face of such a giant monster as false information instead of projecting one’s power onto technology is part of alternative ways and solutions.

My research addresses all these four gaps and adds another dimension to the problem of working with false information. My findings link falsity with conflict and tension in a relationship in the background that is not resolved and that has a tendency to be covered by political correctness, which can be a tool of (self)censorship and silencing. Similarly, I suggest finding a narrative behind falsity allows us to relate to it, engage and interact, and by way of

doing it, find a new perspective, insights, ideas, and possible ways to relate—either towards this narrative or towards people who represent them through “falsity,” or maybe both.

To do the above, in times of greater polarization and distancing (Lazer et al., 2018), my research shows: We need people who are able to hold different views, belief systems, and polarities, both at the same time. In addition, to relate to a different view or belief of the other, one needs to access the own experience and bring a human heart to allow actual human interaction to happen so that all those narratives and grandiose ideas that stand behind false information break down and there is a possibility for a new relationship—either to different viewpoints and/or people who share them.

Thus, my research shows that technological solutions, which account for 92% of all solutions now (Maseri et al., 2020), are not enough to address false information. Paradoxically, with advances in technology for waging wars (Zaluzhnyi, 2024), information technology with AI, social media technology, and sophisticated propaganda machines (Aral, 2020) that fuel greater violence and wars (Aral, 2020; Maseri et al., 2020), living together on one planet Earth is becoming more complicated. In Bohm’s (2004) *On Dialogue* Senge writes, “The modern world is full of increasingly stunning technological advances and an increasing inability to live together.” (para. 15). Arnold Mindell (2014) shares, “Behind the world’s most difficult problems are people—groups of people who do not get along together” (p. 1). So, I argue, and my research proves that there is an untouched big potential in human interventions, and in advancing human-based solutions to work with falsity. In fact, all three focus group discussions showed how people bringing their feelings and intimate experiences, transformed some narratives and relationship to them; and how a new skill of holding different polarities at the same time is needed in our times.

Alternative Strategies

In addition to existing strategies that address false information, which are majorly aimed at fighting it (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021), my research reveals alternative strategies, which I outline here.

First, relationship work between different views and work on polarities, including tensions and conflicts, in local or global society, in private or public settings, individually or between different groups, is an indirect contribution to addressing false information creation and spreading.

Second, promoting a culture of conflict with examples of how working with conflicts can improve relationships among all sides in private or public lives may be crucial to address falsity. It may balance the general viewpoint that conflicts polarize and distance people and groups. There can be public information and more importantly, public practice through open facilitated discussions on how we can learn and advance in the relationship realm by working on personal or collective conflicts.

Third, media can be a channel to highlight stories and examples from mere people or public figures who work on dilemma as a human being about how to stay true to the self and relate to other viewpoints, interests, traditions, and cultural, social, and political norms, to role model the new possibilities of holding both positions, and finding relationships between them, providing space for common learning in that area.

Fourth, supporting the culture of relating to different narratives, worldviews and opposing opinions, and bringing examples on how it is possible to disagree and still relate, and be able to talk and interact about it, if not on the own, then with a help of a friend, an observer or a facilitator.

Fifth, studying closely and learning from, as well as highlighting the innate talent of people to hold polarities and providing educational opportunities to learn a skill of holding different narratives and opposing viewpoints—in one heart, space, and conversation, can be yet another strategy to address false information of our times.

One of the implications of my research is that falsity is connected to relationship work and potentially to conflicts and tensions that are inevitable in any relationship work and I think is an organic part of it. So, in addition to existing strategies for dealing with false information, individuals, groups, organizations, and governments may consider investing in knowledge, skills, and practices of conflict resolution that grow relationships. Programs that contribute to learning how to follow the self in a certain context and time and stay in a relationship—with others, traditions, family values, social norms, and state regulations, to name a few, contribute indirectly to the big issue of false information of our times and equip one on how to deal with it in addition to all existing strategies.

My study also shows that we need private and public spaces, including media and social media, with examples of mere people and leaders solving relationship problems and resolving conflicts that improve relationships. So, the culture of conflict resolution that makes relationships a little bit better is not only an imaginary abstract concept but a real concrete working model and practice for people. One other implication is that we need to study people and maybe groups who have innate talents to hold different views and polarities, learn from them, and develop such a skill—one that can be used in public spaces for all the many stories, narratives, viewpoints, and worldviews to have a possibility to come together and interact, bringing our human hearts and experiences. Other implications can be drawn from the alternative strategies that I listed above.

Interpretation and Application of Findings

The three key themes of my research are complementary, and my main research contribution is a connection between false information and all its variations to the relationship process and potentially unresolved tensions and conflicts behind it. So, as I mentioned above, in addition to fighting false information, which I think is crucial, another strategy is to invest emotionally and financially into the culture of conflict resolution and relationship building so that people could navigate the worlds of different belief systems that stand behind falsities that cannot be simply changed fast with “correct” information. Moreover, if we imagine it is possible, doing so may not only refute falsity but, to some extent, deny the worldview of another, which, in some cases, automatically may deny the other’s existence, however loud it sounds. According to my analysis, that may be one of the difficulties in fighting false information, which may not always work.

To illustrate my research contribution in a concrete, practical way, I want to bring an example and suggest an application of my findings. In February 2024, Tucker Carlson, the ex-host of political talk shows at Fox News, took an interview with Vladimir Putin, the Russian president. The interview became a ground for Putin’s many lies to be reinstated, which had been alive and flourishing. These lies, clearly, were not changed or transformed since their first publication in Putin’s essay in 2014, when Crimea was occupied, and the Russian Federation started the war in Ukraine. They seem to be deeply seated beliefs that cannot be refuted or changed with facts and proof. Even though many historians, such as Yaroslav Hrytsak, Serhii Plokhy, and Timothy Snyder, to name a few, refute these lies together with Ukrainian people and some media such as the StopFake, Spravdi.gov.ua, these lies are alive and thriving, and want it

or not, drive Putin's decisions, which bring terror to Ukraine and cause genocide of the Ukrainian people. As a result, this force seems to be unstoppable.

Even though I appreciate all the fighting strategies, I also want to find out and suggest what else we, mere people, can do in the face of such open lies in times of war. Thus, I want to apply my research findings and first search and name a narrative behind these lies. Snyder's (2024) analysis makes clear that one of the many narratives is this one: that Ukraine does not exist and does not have a right to exist and that there is "the myth of eternal Russia" (para. 5) with Ukrainians being "Nazis" (para. 7) and the aggressors, "because they [Ukrainians] do not agree that they and their country do not exist" (para. 10), do not want to be Russians and "refuse to accept that Russians are pure no matter what we do" (para. 12). It echoes the analysis of a Ukrainian researcher, Abyzova (2024), who states in her thesis something similar: "The Russian narrative is that Ukraine does not really exist. Ukrainian people just lack their awareness of being Russians. So, the Russian army comes to take what is theirs" (p. 7).

Thanks to Snyder (2024) and Abyzova (2024), one can see, identify, and name the narrative of "Ukraine that does not really exist" (p. 7) that stands behind all the many lies of Putin and Russia as a state. It is interesting to note that such a narrative is not completely false. It exists in the Ukrainian society, in a different sense though, with people postponing their lives, not talking about celebrating or enjoying life, and thus not fully existing due to the war and the need to survive and support our soldiers fighting on the front. Addressing this narrative may be crucial for the Ukrainian people, not to change the viewpoint of Putin, as it seems to be impossible, but to relate to this narrative and bring necessary changes in their own lives. One of the many ways could be (and it will differ, depending on who is working with the narrative, as it is contextual and individual)—to reclaim one's own life and existence. I find such a response in

the research of Abyzova (2024). Her work is about experiencing joy and connecting to one's sense of joy in Ukraine in times of war, about celebrating life, especially in times when there is no space for it, in times of deep pain, much suffering, and a mode of survival. The author shares her path and journey to it. Although there are various manifestations of what it means to live fully for each person, Abyzova presents one of the many ways of dealing with such lies. So, whenever the lies re-appear in the media, it could become a reminder to go and celebrate life and live fully, with all due respect and pain for those who have given their lives for it. Moreover, for some people connecting to the soldiers who have died through a moment of silence may equally be the way to live fully. For others it could be about supporting Ukrainians to celebrate life and enjoy life, even if it does not seem like the right time, and this is the way to "fight" the lies of Russia, but in a different way. It can be a subject for further study. Still, I think it is a fascinating response from Abyzova (2024), and I suspect that it may even positively affect Ukrainian society in the long term. Instead of focusing on survival and having we-live-today-only mentality, getting more and more resources and not having enough (which is the basis of corruption), having space and time to enjoy life and celebrate what one has at the moment in the middle of hard and impossible times, can be nourishing and life-changing; it can generate another mentality that has a long-term perspective for years ahead, which potentially may lead to positive changes in society (and maybe less corruption) over time.

To sum up, my example of how my research results can be applied, finding the narrative behind lies gives a possibility to engage and interact with it and find a response, a counter-narrative, and, as a result, a different way to deal with falsity. In the case of the above, it is not about persuading anybody, especially Putin, Russia, and its people, but about reclaiming one's right to exist by enjoying life for some, or connecting to silence and the loss of Ukrainian

people, and thus live life fully every moment while supporting other Ukrainians to do so as well, especially in times when there is no time and moral right to do so. It may be a non-ordinary and shamanic way of dealing with false information and open lies, as there is another dimension to solving the issue at hand. At the same time, it can change one's attitude towards lies, make lies smaller and less potent, transform them, take its energy, so to speak, and use it to bring necessary changes in one's lifestyle. One of my research findings is that behind falsity, there is potentially a relationship between different worldviews, values, and belief systems. Finding a narrative behind falsity can be a way to relate to it; bringing a human heart to it, its process can bring changes in the relationship towards the other's false claim, especially in situations when fighting and refuting it does not work. Thus, it allows one to find a new ground and relationship to the belief system of the other, however true or false, making it no longer so powerful and overwhelming. However, more research is needed on how doing it affects and changes lies, and in the long-term, how it affects and changes relationships between different sides, too.

As my research shows, finding a narrative behind a false claim gives a chance for a human being to relate to it in a direct or indirect way and thus transform it and bring changes, either for both sides, at best or for one's own perspective and life. It may be an empowering approach, shifting the power from the lies and falsity to the power of a human being who can do something about it and not be powerless in the face of false information, thus bringing one's own agency in the face of one of the greatest dangers of our times (Aral, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

My research findings suggest that if one can identify and engage a narrative behind false information, there is a possibility to move from the argument of about which side is true or false,

or right or wrong, to the realm of a relationship with this narrative, possibly transform or update it, and find new ways for the self or both viewpoints and sides. It may be empowering for people, especially in the face of new technologies and ever-growing information and falsity, to have a way to deal with falsity through human interaction. The next step may be to research how such a relationship works, what kind of relationship work is needed to bring changes, and how it affects and/or transforms falsity that is addressed in the first place. In other words, future research may focus on how relationship work impacts falsity or lies and, in the long-term, how it affects and changes relationships between different sides and people who stand there, too.

In addition, research on conflict resolutions and examples of how it works, especially in times of war, on different individual, collective, country, and world levels, with some positive outcomes in terms of relationships, might not be enough. Such examples that lead to better relationships not only are important to bring de-escalation but also are crucial for future work and confidence that opening up to the false beliefs of the other can bring some resolution.

Since I am talking about innate human talent or a skill to hold different viewpoints and polarities at the same time, researching what it takes for one to be able to hold both polarities and both belief systems that may contradict each other, with examples from different countries and cultures and learnings, and latest advances, may also be part of the future research.

More research on how human personal experiences and feelings can change and shift the interaction between different viewpoints and narratives to improve relationships can also contribute to the general culture of conflict resolution to become a more mainstream practice on personal and collective levels.

In addition, talking about the research design and process, for the future research I would recommend scholars to consider having one or two trained facilitators, who can hold emotionally

tense moments and frame moments of resolution in a discussion to collect data. These facilitators are trained to be sensitive to what is being said and how it is said, to catch conscious and unconscious signals. They are fluid and flexible to stand for different sides, one at a time, who can bring more awareness and frame what is happening at a moment, and, if necessary, can pick up the most uncomfortable, unpopular or marginal sides or roles in a given context and time, giving them voice and allowing them to express their deeper meaning or essence.

The above suggestion is based on the limitation of my study that I describe below about having trained facilitators in the room during focus group discussions. On one hand, it is a limitation; one could test how the model works with no facilitators in the room. On the other hand, we already live in the world without facilitators in most cases, with tensions leading to conflicts, greater distancing, and marginalization at best and violence and wars at worst, especially if hot topics or existential issues are at hand for both sides. That is why having one or two facilitators for the research not only helps to collect more grounded data for research, facilitating and thus unfolding the processes that are stuck, but also serves as research in action and to some as a role model on how to interact with diverse viewpoints for those who are interested, bringing more cohesion in a given group, and leading to some resolutions or changes in perspectives on a given theme or topic.

One possibility would be to train participants with basic conflict resolution skills or dialogue skills, but I think it is unnecessary, unless people are highly interested, and it may be part of the research process. Moreover, in some cases participants can perceive such a training before a discussion as counter-productive: Dialogue is not the goal, and some people do not want to go into dialogue as they sense they would potentially lose their position or point (or status quo). For example, dialogue can marginalize the already marginalized voices, and the job of a

facilitator is, on the contrary, to bring these voices more to the center or awareness of a group. Besides, different cultures have different level of tolerance to dialogue or tension or conflict, and processwork facilitators that I know of are not to bring dialogue or changes, but to follow what is happening, understand and learn each position and culture to allow the interaction between different sides, to bring greater awareness about different sides and positions. It may be useful and enriching for data collection and research outcomes, but also it may serve the society and particular groups as a model to have a facilitated discussion to allow interaction in the most impossible situations, especially when a group is highly diverse, polarized, and/or split.

Limitations

Participants of all the focus group discussions of my research were majorly from the Deep Democracy community, who practice inner work, conflict resolution, and greater awareness daily in personal lives and professionally in different work environments. Deep Democracy is one of the most advanced conflict resolution paradigms, and it has become my training and home since 2010. Even though I invited wider circles of people and opened my research events to the wider public, most people who came knew me in one way or another and connected to me through my facilitation practice. As such, all these discussions were possible mainly due to the advanced facilitation skills in the room. Participants have an experience of holding high emotional moments and processing diverse information in the field, in other words, allowing polarities and different opinions and views to communicate with each other while bringing personal human experiences. Thanks to that, there was greater awareness in the room than in other focus groups, and a possibility to complete some conversations. For example, when there was a discussion about “good vs. evil,” one participant picked up the “evil” part and represented it personally, as a human being, with other people nodding, or resonating with what

was being said. It made this interaction complete and gave me a chance to study this and other brilliant interventions of other facilitators and find answers to my research questions.

Another limitation is connected to my ability to facilitate focus group discussions and analyze collected data. I used not only factual information and verbatim word-for-word transcripts but also non-verbal signals and feedback from the group during the discussions, reflection of some participants, and, in addition to it, my subjective analysis and feelings from me as a facilitator and a researcher, which I experienced during and after the interaction processes. I used spoken and unspoken information and translating it into key themes.

Yet another limitation is that I have two research questions, with more thorough answers to the first question. At the same time, the second question only had the beginning thoughts and direction to be researched further, as I needed more focus and space to discover it fully.

Researcher's Bias

As far as I can remember, I have always been interested in relationships. The relationship is everything to me, from relationships between my parents, my brother, and now to my partner, to friends, and to the world. Naturally, it has become my passion. Even though I gave each group the freedom to choose the topic and work on it, my findings are connected to the area of my long-term interest: relationships. In the end, I came up with a conclusion that behind falsity there is an unresolved relationship issue—between two opposing viewpoints, worldviews, or sides. Understanding a story or a narrative behind falsity—is a way to interact with it and possibly bring new solutions. It may be quite possible that my passion was driving the research itself. However, I also think that it is quite possible that the topic of false information got me to bring its message about relationships in the background across through my research. Thus, my interests may have eventually limited my research findings; however, equally, my interests allow me to

expand the scholarly field of working with false information, highlighting the relationship aspect of the background of false information, which is a relatively new contribution.

Another bias is that I am Ukrainian, and my view about the topic may be limited. However, for the whole of my life, I was living and experiencing propaganda with my own skin, witnessing and participating in three revolutions, and I was suffering from propaganda, which became partially an impulse for this research to understand how a mere person can live in it, relate to it, and can stop being a victim of it, but understand how to deal with it better and gain agency to do so.

Contribution to Knowledge

With my research, I wanted to bring a little contribution to knowledge in the area of false information, how to address it in other ways rather than fighting it, and how we could do it as human beings without relying too much on technology to resolve our issues. I wanted to highlight that a mere person, in impossible circumstances, with the information war abound, could become a key participant and lead the process of information creation, processing, and spreading to bring more awareness about the alternative ways of dealing with falsity, contributing overall to better relationships among diverse people and worldviews on this planet. So, the fight against false news could turn into the fight for awareness and better relationships—especially with people or groups who tell each other “lies,” consciously or not.

Conclusion

Fighting false information, propaganda, open lies, rumors, misinformation, and disinformation, to name a few, is the main strategy nowadays (Lazer et al., 2018; Maseri et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2021), and it is an important one. Facing falsity and bringing facts could be a matter of life and death. At the same time, there are a lot of instances when fighting false

information does not work. Rather, it turns out to be denying another's worldview, belief systems, and, as a result, one's identity and even right to exist. That is partially an explanation for why fighting falsity does not always work, and there is numerous evidence that refuting false information does the contrary, amplify the latter and even backfires (Aral, 2020; Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Bouygues, 2019; Kupferschmidt, 2022; McIntyre, 2018; Van Bavel et al., 2021), igniting greater violence and fueling wars (Aral, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018). In such cases, when direct confrontation is “unwinnable” in the message of Deb Roy (personal communication, January 4, 2021), my research findings can be helpful for several reasons. So we take the energy generated by false information that travels deep, wide, and fast (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and before waiting for it for too long to grow into violence and another war, we can use it for local and global community-building processes.

My research findings show that looking for a narrative behind falsity and making it visible shifts the dynamic from fighting to more relationships to that narrative and people who stand for them, consciously or unconsciously, purposefully or by chance. Even if there is no connection and divergent dynamic between different sides, framing a narrative that stands behind false information allows one to find a belief system and a worldview of the other—that is, to engage and interact with it, even if not agree, allowing two opposites to co-exist and not deny each other, thus creating space or home for both. This is a big shift, to my mind, from finding who is telling the truth or lies and canceling the other to providing space for various belief systems and worldviews to interact with each other. Besides, doing so changes the power dynamic and empowers a human being, allowing a person or a group of people to stop being simply victims of falsity, to become active agents who can do something with it, with their own heart, even if internally (or in relationship to the other), finding these stories within the self

and/or understand them better, to begin with. As a result, it increases one's agency through more curiosity. It redirects the energy from fighting to researching different narratives, allowing them to look for ways to interact with each other. By doing so, my research brings another role in the field: not just the fighter on both sides or viewpoints, but an additional side who can hold both narratives, however absurd, while searching for unpredictable and maybe unimaginable ways to interact with each other, thus bringing more flow into communication instead of distancing even further, even if there is no concrete and complete resolution. Finding narratives allows an individual or a collective to disclose polarities and interact with them; as one participant of my focus group discussion said in the end, "Propaganda is happening when we don't want to communicate. When there is communication, there is no propaganda, but the interest to hear each other."

During my research, I have kept thinking that false information is not just an absolute evil. Both on macro and micro levels, and irrespective if it is intentionally created or unconsciously spread, as a phenomenon it can possibly carry hidden seeds and solutions. Moreover, however surprising it sounds, as my research shows, it can be a dream about a better relationship between people and different worldviews. In addition, the energy resulting from falsity and propaganda can potentially be used for a community-building project. Thus, falsity is an indicator of "cracks" in a system and "splits" in society or existing polarities, and we can use it as "new oil" to build our local and global communities instead of allowing it to inflate to new, uncontrollable big fires and wars worldwide. For that, as my study shows, we need an observer, a facilitator, or a friend who has an innate gift or learned skills to hold mutually exclusive views and polarities both at the same time and bring their own heart and feelings into the interaction

process. I argue that technology alone cannot make it. We need a human heart to do so, with the support of technology.

No wonder that falsity is one of the major phenomena of the 20th and 21st centuries (Reyna, 2023) at times of increasing polarization and distancing (Lazer et al., 2018), silencing (Lorde, 1980), political correctness and censorship (Freedom Forum, 2016), group closures (Asikainen, 2022). These two tendencies—increase of falsity and increase of distancing and polarization seem to belong to each other and need each other, as falsity may possibly carry seeds for a solution to more distancing and closures. Moreover, it is no wonder that Russia (and some other countries too) is a master in finding “cracks” in the earth, “drilling” a hole, and mining natural resources from it; it is thriving worldwide with its one of the most sophisticated propaganda machines (Aral, 2020), shaking the continents and the world with its information operations. Despite horrible things and wars that it carries, it must be doing us a favor, as through falsity and propaganda it highlights existing polarities and brings them onto a surface from beneath—for us as a society to interact with sooner than later and find better relationships before we fall into a trap for falsities to divide us even further (Riehle, 2021). In other words, false information is a sign that there are “cracks” in society, in a good way, with different narratives and polarities present—for us to understand and interact with so that it can become a “new oil” for the world, and we can use all existing cracks and splits that we identify through falsities—as a natural resource for community building processes.

Thus, my research shows that working on polarities and conflicts and giving this work media space to highlight how it can improve relationships (and not ignite even more fire and exacerbate existing splits)—is a direct contribution to dealing with false information. Doing so is not easy, and not for the faint-hearted, but it is a challenging enough task for human beings, and

it is a real fight—with the own belief system and biases. It can be no less energetic and exciting than reading/spreading false information and going to war. So, I state that fighting falsity is important. However, at times when such a strategy does not work, it can be an indicator that there is a “split” in a group or society. So, one may consider finding narratives and polarities behind falsities—to identify and interact with, which can be an alternative way to use this energy for community building before it grows into greater violence.

My research shows that finding narratives behind false claims can lead from facts to interaction with these narratives, shift the conversation from finding who is telling the “truth” or “falsity”—to the relationship realm, and empower people to bring their human hearts and feelings to engage with this narrative, step into conflict, if needed, and potentially find a new relationship to it. It may not necessarily change the falsity and people who believe in it, which is not the point of my research. However, there may be more interaction with the narrative behind false information, more understanding, and some new ways of dealing with it—either internally, individually, or in relationship to another side and collectively between groups. My research gives hope that people can find ways to relate, at least can hold space and relate between different narratives of each other, in times, contexts and locations where it seems to be impossible to do.

References

- Abyzova, M. (2024). *Exploration of joy in Ukraine at war* [ProcessWork Diploma Thesis, Deep Democracy Institute]. International Association of Process Oriented Psychology Dissertations & Theses. <https://iapop.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Exploration-of-joy-in-Ukraine-at-war-Maria-Abyzova-2024.pdf>
- Addams, J. (1916). The devil baby at Hull-House. In J. Sharlet (Ed.), *Radiant truths: Essential dispatches, reports, confessions, and other essays on American belief* (pp. 89–108). Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300206968-009>
- Addeo, F. (2010). Hermeneutic as a research method. [https://scholar.google.ch/scholar?q=Addeo,+F.+\(2010\).+Hermeneutic+as+a+research+method.&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar](https://scholar.google.ch/scholar?q=Addeo,+F.+(2010).+Hermeneutic+as+a+research+method.&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar)
- Aral, S. (2020). *The hype machine: How social media disrupts our elections, our economy, and our health—and how we must adapt*. Crown Currency.
- Ardèvol-Abreu, A., Delponti, P., & Rodríguez-Wangüemert, C. (2020). Intentional or inadvertent fake news sharing? Fact-checking warnings and users' interaction with social media content. *Profesional de la Información*, 29(5). <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.sep.07>
- Arif, A. (2020). *Troubling matters: Examining the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media during mass disruption events* (Publication No. 28263891) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/3a0af06f3608b9a3e56f01e4b5c075ec/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Asikainen, A., Iñiguez, G., Ureña-Carrión, J., Kaski, K., & Kivelä, M. (2020). Cumulative effects of triadic closure and homophily in social networks. *Science Advances*, 6(19). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax7310>
- Aslett, K., Guess, A. M., Bonneau, R., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2022). News credibility labels have limited average effects on news diet quality and fail to reduce misperceptions. *Science Advances*, 8(18). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abl3844>
- Bailey, T. C., & Hsieh-Yee, I. (2019). Combating the sharing of false information: History, framework, and literacy strategies. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 24(1–2), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10875301.2020.1863286>
- Baldwin, J. (1985). *The price of the ticket*. St. Martin's Press.
- Benhabib, S. (1997). The embattled public sphere: Hannah Arendt, Juergen Habermas and Beyond. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 44(90), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.3167/th.1997.449002_

- Bhandaru, D. (2013). Is White normativity racist? Michel Foucault and post-civil rights racism. *Polity*, 45(2), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pol.2013.6>
- Bohm, D. (1968). On creativity. *Leonardo*, 1(2), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571951>
- Bohm, D. (2004). On dialogue. Routledge.
- Bouygues, H. L. (2019, May 6). 3 simple habits to improve your critical thinking. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/05/3-simple-habits-to-improve-your-critical-thinking>
- Breen, R. L. (2006). A practical guide to focus-group research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30(3), 463–475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098260600927575>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). *Relationship*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/relationship>
- Chadwick, A., Vaccari, C., O’Loughlin, B. (2018). Do tabloids poison the well of social media? Explaining democratically dysfunctional news sharing. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4255–4274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769689>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315429618>
- Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, M. F. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Clandinin, D. J. & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative inquiry. In P. Peterson, E. Baker, & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (3rd ed., pp. 436–441). Elsevier Science. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-044894-7.01387-7>
- Clandinin, D. J., Pushor, D., & Orr, A. M. (2007). Navigating sites for narrative inquiry. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(1), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106296218>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Rosiek, J. (2007). Mapping a landscape of narrative inquiry: Borderline spaces and tensions. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 35–76). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226552.n2>
- Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). *Relationship*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/relationship>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

- Christopher, G. C. (2021). Truth, racial healing, and transformation: Creating public sentiment. *Health Equity*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1089/heq.2021.29008.ncl>
- Crowther, S., Ironside, P., Spence, D., & Smythe, Liz. (2017). Crafting stories in hermeneutic phenomenology research: A methodological device. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6), 826–835. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316656161>
- Czarniawska, B. (1998). *A narrative approach to organization studies*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1994). Narratives of individual and organizational identities. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 17(1), 193–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.1994.11678884>
- Dashew, B., Grossman, K. D., & Lawrence, R. (2020). Listening to the voices of dissent: Bridging political polarization through imagined dialogue. *Reflective Practice, International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 21(6), 773–785. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2020.1821634>
- Denzin, N. K. (2017). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), 8–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864>
- Dickinson, P. (2021, July 15). Putin’s new Ukraine essay reveals imperial ambitions. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/>
- Dworkin, J. (1989). *Group process work: A state for personal and global development* [Doctoral dissertation, The Graduate School of the Union Institute]. International Association of Process Oriented Psychology Dissertations & Theses. <https://iapop.com/dissertations/>
- Epstein, Z., Sirlin, N., Arechar, A., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2023). The social media context interferes with truth discernment. *Science Advances*, 9(9). <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/q4bd2>
- Fox, J. (2020). “Fake news” – The perfect storm: Historical perspectives. *Historical Research*, 93(259), 172–187. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hisres/htz011>
- Freedom Forum. (2016, March 29). Speaking freely: bell hooks [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2bmnwehlpA>
- Gibbs, A. (1997). Focus groups. *Social Research Update*, 19(8), 1–8. https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/her-macdonaldsbs2000fall2015b/files/2011/06/Focus-Groups_Anita-Gibbs.pdf

- Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Science*, 363(6425), 374–378. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706>
- Hani, G. (2023, November 6). Friends, I ask that you share my words. It’s hard for all of us to find words these days [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/dannygal69/posts/pfbid02wNbaxaVsTRGEjthYyFUAXQFu6rJdZSoAqz7aAhVtEYZWLVLHLoXUsJBp2YGqcjKJU1>
- Hao, K. (2020, December 4). We read the paper that forced Timnit Gebru out of Google. Here’s what it says. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/12/04/1013294/google-ai-ethics-research-paper-forced-out-timnit-gebru/>
- Kafle, N. P. (2011). Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified. *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5(1), 181–200. <https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v5i1.8053>
- Kaku, M. (1993). *Hyperspace*. Oxford University Press.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups. *British Medical Journal*, 311(7000), 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299>
- Kubota, H., Raymond, H., Caine, V., & Clandinin, D. J. (2022). Understanding social inclusion: A narrative inquiry into the experiences of refugee families with young children. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 30(2), 184–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1998885>
- Kuhn, D., Cheney, R., & Weinstock, M. (2000). The development of epistemological understanding. *Cognitive Development*, 15(3), 309–328. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2014\(00\)00030-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2014(00)00030-7)
- Kupferschmidt, K. (2022). On the trail of bullshit. Studying misinformation should become a top scientific priority, says biologist Carl Bergstrom. *Science*, 375(6587) 1334–1337. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abq1754>
- Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., Metzger, M. J., Nyhan, B., Pennycook, G., Rothschild, D., Schudson, M., Sloman, S. A., Sunstein, C. R., Thorson, E. A., Watts, D. J., & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news: Addressing fake news requires a multidisciplinary effort. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998>
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the “post-truth” era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4), 353–369. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008>

- Lorde, A. (1980). *The cancer journals*. Spinsters, Inc.
https://monoskop.org/images/1/16/Lorde_Audre_The_Cancer_Journals_2nd_ed_1980.pdf
- Maseri, A. N., Norman, A. A., Eke, C. I., Ahmad, A., & Molok, N. N. A. (2020). Socio-technical mitigation effort to combat cyber propaganda: A systematic literature mapping. *IEEE Access*, 8, 92929–92944. <https://doi.org/10.1109/access.2020.2994658>
- McFaul, M. (Speaker). [Stanford Alumni]. (2022, November 21). *Explaining the causes and consequences of Putin's invasion of Ukraine with Mike McFaul* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wbzf0ix2G5I>
- McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. The MIT Press.
- Menken, D. (2021). *Facilitating a more perfect union. A guide for politicians and leaders*.
<https://www.dawnmenken.com/books>
- Meyer, R. (2018, March 8). The grim conclusions of the largest-ever study of fake news. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/>
- Mindell, A. [Amy]. (2016). *The evolution and 3 branches of process theory* (3rd ed.).
<https://www.aamindell.net/articles>
- Mindell, A. [Arnold]. (2012). *Quantum mind. The edge between physics and psychology*. Deep Democracy Exchange.
- Mindell, A. [Arnold]. (2014). *Sitting in the fire: Large group transformation using conflict and diversity*. Deep Democracy Exchange.
- Mindell, A. [Arnold]. (2017). *Conflict: phases, forums, and solutions for our dreams and body, organizations, governments, and planet*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Mindell, A. [Arnold]. (2019). *The dreambody in relationships* (2nd ed.). Gatekeeper Press.
<https://www.aamindell.net/books-by-arnold-mindell#dreambody-relationships>
- Mindell, A. [Amy], & Mindell, A. [Arnold]. (n.d.). *Glossary of process work terms*.
<https://www.aamindell.net/books>
- Mookherjee, S. (2019). *Three studies in misinformation*. (Publication No. 13881083) [Doctoral dissertation, State University of New York at Binghamton]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Moravec, P. L., Minas, R. K., & Dennis, A. R. (2019). Fakes news on social media: People believe what they want to believe when it makes no sense at all. *MIS Quarterly*, 43(4), 1343–1360. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3269541>

- Morgan, D. L. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129–152.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129>
- Muñoz, R. A. (2018). A research methodology in the service of critical thinking: Hermeneutic approach in the post-truth era. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 26(148).
<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3393>
- Nash, R. (2019). *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative*. Information Age Publishing.
- Nguyen, C. T. (2020). Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2), 141–161.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32>
- O’Grady, G., Clandinin, D. J., & O’Toole, J. (2018). Engaging in educational narrative inquiry: Making visible alternative knowledge. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(2), 153–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2018.1475149>
- Ortega, M. (2017). Decolonial woes and practices of un-knowing. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 31(3), 504–516. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.31.3.0504>
- OxfordLanguages. (2016). Word of the Year 2016.
<https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>
- Rabb, N., Cowen, L., de Ruiter, J. P., & Scheutz, M. (2022). Cognitive cascades: How to model (and potentially counter) the spread of fake news. *PLoS ONE*, 17(1), e0261811.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261811>
- Race, K. E., Hotch, D. F., & Parker T. (1994). Rehabilitation program evaluation: Use of focus groups to empower clients. *Evaluation Review*, 18(6), 730–740.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841x9401800605>
- Reyna, V. F. (2023). Social media: Why sharing interferes with telling true from false. *Science Advances*, 9(9). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adg8333>
- Riehle, K. P. (2021). Winners and losers in Russia’s information war. *Intelligence and National Security*, 36(7), 1057–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2021.1877405>
- Rini, R. (2017). Fake news and partisan epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27(2), E-43–E-64. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2017.0025>
- Ruths, D. (2019). The misinformation machine. Misinformation results from many interacting processes. *Science*, 363(6425). <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaw1315>

- Said, H. H. (2024). *Finding self in adversity* [ProcessWork Diploma Thesis, Deep Democracy Institute]. International Association of Process Oriented Psychology Dissertations & Theses. <https://iapop.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Finding-Self-in-Adversity-Husna-Hamisi-Said-2024.pdf>
- Sanchez, C., & Dunning, D. (2021). Cognitive and emotional correlates of belief in political misinformation: Who endorses partisan misbeliefs? *Emotion*, 21(5), 1091–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000948>
- Schupbach, E. (2004). *The gold at the end of the rainbow: A hermeneutic study of a therapist's spiritual experience* [Doctoral dissertation, The Union Institute and University]. <https://www.iapop.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/dissertations/schupbach-gold.pdf>
- Schupbach, M. (Speaker). [Deep Democracy Institute]. (2018, Sept. 24). *Interview with Ph.D. Max Schupbach* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_WQj-ReHWI&t=1s
- Shaw, J. (2017). Thinking with stories: A renewed call for narrative inquiry as a social work epistemology and methodology. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 34(2), 207–227. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042889ar>
- Sivek, S. C. (2018). Both facts and feelings: Emotion and news literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 10(2), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.23860/jmle-2018-10-2-7>
- Snyder, T. (Professor). [YaleCourses]. (2022, September 3). *The making of modern Ukraine. Class 1: Ukrainian questions posed by Russian invasion* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJczLlwp-d8&list=PLh9mgdi4rNewfxO7LhBoz_1Mx1MaO6sw_&index=1
- Snyder, T. (2024, February 11). Putin's genocidal myth. The foolishness of fascism, revealed in the Carlson interview. Thinking about ... <https://snyder.substack.com/p/putins-genocidal-myth>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2022). *George Herbert Mead*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mead/#RolSelGenOth>
- Stevens, P. E. (1996). Focus groups: Collecting aggregate-level data to understand community health phenomena. *Public Health Nursing*, 13(3), 170–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-1446.1996.tb00237.x>
- Van Bavel, J. J., Harris, E. A., Pärnamets, P., Rathje, S., Doell, K. C., & Tucker, J. A. (2021). Political psychology in the digital (mis)information age: A model of news belief and sharing. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 15(1), 84–113. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/u5yts>

- Villenas, S. (2001). Latina mothers and small-town racisms: Creating narratives of dignity and moral education in North Carolina. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32(1), 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2001.32.1.3>
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>
- Webb, C. & Kevern, J. (2001). Focus groups as a research method: A critique of some aspects of their use in nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 33(6), 798–805. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2001.01720.x>
- Westney, Z. V. (2020). *The social media machines: An investigation of the effect of trust moderated by disinformation on users' decision-making process* (Publication No. 135) [Doctoral dissertation, Nova Southeastern University]. NSUWorks. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/gscis_etd/1135/
- Wight, C. (2018). Post-truth, postmodernism and alternative facts. *New Perspectives*, 26(3), 17–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825x1802600302>
- Wilck, A. M. (2021). *Intense news: The role of emotion in the perception of (fake) news* (Publication No. 2831) [Doctoral dissertation, University at Albany, State University of New York]. Legacy Theses & Dissertations. <https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/2831>
- Zaluzhnyi, V. (2024, February 8). *Ukraine's army chief: The design of war has changed*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/01/opinions/ukraine-army-chief-war-strategy-russia-valerii-zaluzhnyi/index.html>

APPENDIX: CONSENT FORM

Doing the Impossible: Dealing with False Beliefs

Welcome to a focus group discussion for the PhD research on “Doing the Impossible: Dealing with False Beliefs.” Before taking part in this focus group discussion, please read the consent form below and press “I Agree” button or say “I Agree” on a Zoom (a response of every participant has to be orally recorded at the beginning of a focus group meeting), if you understand the statements and freely consent to participate in the study.

Consent Form

This study involves a focus group discussion that examines how one can deal with false information and make sense out of it. The study is being conducted online by Yuliya Filippovska in partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree at Union Institute & University. It has been approved by Union Institute & University’s Institutional Review Board. No deception is involved, and the study involves no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., the level of risk encountered in daily life).

Participation in the focus group typically takes one hour and a half or ninety minutes and is confidential. Participants will take part in a facilitated discussion, together identify a topic to focus on and interact about it. Such an interaction is designed to understand narratives behind false claims and try to interact with it, to add to existing fighting strategies aimed towards false information. A discussion is treated as confidential, and in no case will contributions from individual participants be identified. Rather, all data will be pooled and published in summary form only.

Participation is voluntary, participants may withdraw from the study at any time, and they may decline to answer any questions if they experience any discomfort with the questions asked. Participants will not be paid to participate in this research study.

If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a participant, you may contact the principal investigator, Yuliya Filippovska, Dr. Christopher Voparil, core faculty advisor.

If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and freely consent to participate in the study, please say “I Agree” during a Zoom recording.

Debriefing

Thank you for your participation in my study. The purpose of this study is to examine alternative strategies to fighting false information. The intent of this online focus group discussion is to look at group data, not that of the individual. Individual identities cannot be determined, and I would like to assure you of your confidentiality and anonymity.

Thank you for your participation. If you would like to know final results, or if you have any questions or additional concerns, you can contact me directly.

Again, thank you,

Yuliya Filippovska