Divide & Conquer: Critical Informatics Approaches to Disinformation

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use a critical informatics approach to investigate institutional disinformation around 2022-23 labor organizing at three higher education institutions: Rutgers University, Temple University, and the University of California. Our contribution to the study of disinformation is the application of critical informatics perspectives that attend to structural power dynamics of disinformation within an institutional context. Understanding the political economic dynamics of disinformation and how these dynamics function can help more solidly contextualize and clarify *how* and *why* disinformation exists across different information systems, so that solutions to this social and institutional problem of disinformation can be more appropriately addressed and understood. The study describes disinformation tactics employed by institutional leaders during higher education labor organizing including: non-performative commitments to "community", legal threats, misleading victories, and elite capture.

KEYWORDS

disinformation; critical informatics; critical theory; information precarity; labor

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of record inflation, an ongoing global pandemic, and increasingly precarious occupational conditions, United States higher education is undergoing a shift towards increased union organizing across university staff, graduate students, and faculty alike (Thelen, 2023). Despite recent increased engagement in labor activism within U.S. higher education, and longer-term but still relatively-recent attention to disinformation studies within information fields, the labor and economic issues as they intertwine with intersectional concerns around information and information systems are far from normalized in information science and technology scholarship. The study underscores the value of integrating multidisciplinary critical approaches (Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann, 2023; Sweeney & Brock, 2014) to examine the interplay between disinformation, structural inequality, and systems of power within the information ecosystem, especially as they relate to labor concerns.

Studying how institutions play a part in information systems use is a cornerstone of social informatics research (Day, 2007; Kling et al., 1998; Sawyer & Eschenfelder, 2002). Information systems' instantiation in pre-existing systemic power relations is fundamental to critical informatics (CI) research (Paris et al., 2021; Sweeney & Brock, 2014). Relatedly, but outside of the scope of this study, a longstanding body of literature in labor studies outlines a lineage of institutional and managerial tactics to dissuade workers from organizing, many of which include disinformation campaigns (Biesel, 2021; Johnson et al., 2003). This study is rooted in material analyses that examine how institutions under capitalism cultivate and maintain existing power structures (Gramsci, 1971; Hall et al., 1978; Marx, 1861/1973; Táíwò, 2022). In particular, this work is interested in the attempts at division around intersectional concerns as seen in Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's (2022) "elite capture" that describes how the powerful attempt to undermine emergent solidarities through the racist dynamics of capitalism. In this work, we build on critical informatics research into power dynamics in information systems by bringing theorization and concepts related to critical theory and propaganda analysis in more concentrated conversation with the study of mis- and disinformation in information fields.

As we focus our study on higher education institutions, we draw from critical theoretical analysis in those spheres. Critical theorist Sarah Ahmed (2004) writes that, through creating institutional commitments, "the university is imagined as a subject" (p. 109). Institutional commitments toward the university "community," students' academic progress, and "good faith" negotiations were frequently invoked in managerial statements concerning labor actions (Kaiser, 2023a; University of California, 2022). Non-performative statements refer to statements that do not bring about the thing they name. University communications often frame the institution as benevolent, disappointed, reasonable, optimistic, and committed in the face of labor actions. As a result of their non-performativity (i.e., not "do[ing] what they say"), university management utilize such rhetorical framings to assign the previously mentioned qualities to themselves, all the while positioning striking union members and their supporters as selfish, unproductive, and detached from the broader university community and its commitments.

This paper contributes to literature in information fields that examine how disinformation, or the construction and spread of false and misleading messages intended to deceive (Jack, 2018), is entangled with structural power dynamics, such as such as patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and ableism (Chong et al., 2021; Floegel & Costello, 2022; Greyson, 2019; Oliphant, 2021; Paris & Pasquetto, 2024), and utilized by those who have structural

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power as a means to undermine solidarity (Nguyễn et al., 2022; Reddi et al., 2021). At the same time, we draw out the largely uncritical relationship that social informatics shares with institutions by building upon multidisciplinary analytical lenses that coalesce in Sweeney and Brock's critical informatics (2014), and information precarity (Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann, 2023), which speaks to how limited access to information and related technologies, inaccurate and irrelevant information, state-sponsored surveillance, and scant social supports are the result of ongoing, interrelated institutional and systemic violences. We extend the theoretical frameworks of non-performative speech acts (Ahmed, 2004) and elite capture (Táíwò, 2022) to describe findings from an analysis of disinformation spread by institutional leaders in three higher education labor strikes.

The cases represent three such instances from across some of the most well-publicized and largest higher education strikes within the strike wave: graduate workers within the University of California system (Hubler, 2022); grad workers at Temple University (Dementri, 2023); and the broad coalition of Rutgers Unions which encompass grad workers, tenured, tenure track, non-tenure track, and adjuncts at Rutgers University (Meko & Stack, 2023). This article centers on two primary research questions. The first research question seeks to situate the examined documents within disinformation discourse, as it relates to the intent to deceive for political or economic ends (Jack, 2017). The second research question helps us uncover what disinformation tactics reveal about structural power within higher education institutions. The research questions examine how propaganda analysis can be utilized to explore the political and economic undercurrents of disinformation in institutional contexts, particularly as they coincide with struggles that aim to highlight and collectively dismantle barriers to higher education. The case studies examined support the study of disinformation as a form of propaganda and a function of hegemonic power and inequality more broadly.

RQ1: How are these management messages disinformation?

RQ2: What are the institutional power dynamics at play in these messages?

METHODS
Research Design
Managerial communications are the analytical units of comparison in our study. The communications from university management ranged from official press releases, university-wide emails, statements to the press, and information posted on institutional websites. Examination of emails and official communications from institutions often comprise data that is analyzed in information policy scholarship (Mehra & Jaber, 2020; Paris et al., 2021; Sanfilippo et al., 2020) and in organizational studies (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Past work in critical informatics has developed case studies of organizations to better understand how they determine and enforce policy (Paris et al., 2021). This work builds on critical informatics' use of the case study method and explicitly applies critical theory's propaganda analysis (Adorno, 1956/1973; Bauer & Nadler, 2021) to understand how institutional commitments to the status quo of structural power hierarchies manifest in messages. The case study method allows us to compare language across analytical units to uncover significant trends and inconsistencies related to power imbalances, such as discursive deception in institutional documents, and the mismatch between promises and actual material processes among stakeholders as is common in critical theoretical studies of institutions. Here we apply critical-theoretical analytical methods to undergird our critical informatics investigation into what disinformation in higher education labor organizing contexts can tell us about institutional dynamics of structural power.

Researcher Positionality
As we focus on interpretative modes of analysis, it is important to declare our positionality that frames our interpretations. The authors work and study at Rutgers University. May's roles as a union member, student, and researcher, and Paris' roles as a union member and department representative, engaging in research, teaching, and organizing service with and among university actors, shape our interpretations and allow us specialized knowledge of one field site and the ground of labor organizing within higher education. Throughout the research process, we reflexively discussed our subject positions and roles as researchers and stakeholders in the phenomenon under investigation and, in one case, our roles and participation in the site of inquiry (Oltmann et al., 2020).

Data Collection & Analysis
First, we gathered 90 primary documents (roughly 30 for each of the three institutions) that contained false and misleading information passed down from administration to union members and non-members alike, as well as news stories, university and union websites, and social media posts. The quotations were selected from managerial communications based on Ahmed's definition of each speech act. Data is available upon request to authors.

To analyze the data, we utilized the aforementioned analytical modes and concepts from critical theory (Adorno, 1956/1973; Ahmed, 2004; Bauer & Nadler, 2021; Táíwò, 2022) to examine how various informational tactics are employed by those in power to further the marginalization of those with less material and structural power, specifically within institutions of higher education. This expands the existing suite of approaches within critical

informatics that can underscore the connections between disinformation, power, and inequality (Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann, 2023; Paris et al., 2021; Sweeney & Brock, 2014) and focuses it within institutions.

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Our examination of official communications across three sites reveals how management creates and propagates purposefully misleading statements to spur confusion and division, which ultimately undermines solidarity that is critical for successful organizing efforts. Additionally, we identify four recurring disinformation tactics employed by university management across the various case study sites, indicated by the subheaders in this section. For the sake of space, we enter a maximum of two citations for each piece of data described. The institutional power arrangements are discussed within these four thematic areas.

Non-Performative Commitments

Across the three universities examined, there were similarities in the language included in managerial communications. Administration frequently utilized the terminology of "continuing" to participate in "good faith" negotiations. One statement reads, "we will continue to negotiate with [the union] in good faith as we have done to date" (Kaiser, 2023a). Another statement from a different university similarly reads, "[the University] continues to negotiate in good faith with the union and is committed to working collaboratively with the [union] to find solutions to outstanding issues" (University of California, 2022). The description of management's participation in negotiations as acting in "good faith" obfuscates how management truly engaged in negotiations. In actuality, management posed legal threats, spread disinformation (Rutgers President, 2023), and were frequently absent at bargaining meetings (TUGSA, 2023), all in order to stall progress in negotiations. Management also utilized language such as "fair and equitable agreement" (Temple University, 2023) and "fair, reasonable, and responsible" (Rutgers University, 2023). Similar to Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization of non-performativity, university administrators describing their own actions as "in good faith", "fair," "equitable," and "reasonable," management conversely frames union members and their demands as both unreasonable and inequitable. Language concerning the "disruption" of labor actions was also employed to undermine solidarity between students and those on strike.

Threats of Illegality

Official administrative communications across the three case study sites revealed disinformation tactics utilized by management to create confusion and division during labor actions. Throughout the duration of labor organizing efforts, management propagated false and misleading information about such efforts. In two case sites, management threatened those participating in labor actions with legal action at the inception of organizing in order to quell future actions. In one case site, management referred to the labor action as an "unlawful" and "illegal strike" (Rutgers President, 2023). At another case site, the administration threatened those participating in the strike by revoking striking employee's essential occupational benefits such as health insurance (Mandel & Kaiser, 2023). Within these examples of managerial disinformation, administration positions labor organizing efforts as not only illegal, but against the greater economic wellbeing and educational objectives of the university. The examined cases illustrate how institutional powers create precarious conditions that limit information access and exacerbate existing structural violences in a configuration that closely resembles Espinoza & Oltmann's (2023) information precarity.

Misleading Victories; Purported End of Labor Actions

Similarly, on the points of information precarity (Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann, 2023) and non-performativity (Ahmed, 2004), at later points during labor actions, management declared misleading "victories" (Hubler, 2022). Moreover, such victories were often announced prior to key documents being agreed upon by all parties. The premature celebration of supposed successes and agreement was utilized by management to generate confusion and division within those participating in such actions and university stakeholders at large. The supposed victories often concerned tentative agreements. Tentative agreements are not legally binding. University administration often referred to tentative agreements as finalized documents that were produced as a result of collaboration at the conclusion of a needlessly drawn out and disruptive struggle (Kaiser, 2023a; Racioppi, 2023). Prior to the union member voting process, official managerial communications at one case site claimed unanimous support for an initial tentative agreement. Over 90% of the union ultimately voted to reject the tentative agreement that would have, in the administration's words, "returned the university to normal operations" (Kaiser, 2023a). The language utilized by management to describe the majority of union members who voted to reject the tentative agreement is highly divisive and misleading. In initially enumerating the supposed gains provided by the tentative agreement, the administration again frames the majority of union membership as an uncooperative faction, and strategically positions union members, union leadership and other university stakeholders at odds by noting that while leadership had "promis[ed] to unanimously recommend the agreement," (Kaiser, 2023a) it was nonetheless rejected by membership. Such statements undermine solidarity and overall trust in the union and its leadership. As a disinformation tactic, the declaration of misleading victories by management positions the demands of organizers as contrary to the university at large, undermines trust in the union, and creates division within membership.

Elite Capture: Divide and Conquer the "Community"

Messaging around the university "community" echoed throughout managerial communications. Management referred to "our community," (University of California, 2022) and expressed gratitude towards the "University community for its patience and flexibility" (Kaiser, 2023b). In a somewhat homogenizing manner, one statement noted that "the community appreciates most graduate assistants, more than 80%, who continue their duties in instruction and research," (Temple University, 2023). Extending Ahmed (2004) the aforementioned examples highlight how managerial communications draw upon an imagined community of which it not only frames at odds with—and outside of—labor actions, but assigns shared sentiments and values.

The question of what constitutes the university "community" is central to this work. Across the three sites, administration showed disregard for international students through exploiting their precarious legal status (DeMentri, 2023; Rutgers AAUP-AFT, 2023) and ignored the concerns of neighboring communities (Maass, 2023). At one case site, management also dismissed transformative, coalition-based demands for housing justice, increased accessibility for people with disabilities, and a racial justice-informed call to defund campus policing (Watanabe, 2022). These actions—or inactions—on behalf of management with regards to addressing barriers to higher education illustrate how the university produces and enforces a highly exclusionary institutional definition of "community."

Following Táíwò's (2022) "elite capture" this institutional definition of community not only ignores those who have been historically excluded from institutions of higher education, but also obscures structural issues and the systems of power that are foundational in producing these inequities. At the same time, union organizers extend a radical politics of solidarity by underscoring how their demands directly address these inequities and are ultimately made with the intention of transforming higher education (TUGSA, 2023).

In disavowing radical demands that respond to the concerns of particularly precarious communities, university management furthers an exclusionary vision of higher education. While university management elide questions of power, union communications speak directly to these concerns. Furthermore, union organizers extend a radical politics of solidarity by underscoring how their demands not only directly address economic inequities, but are ultimately done with the intention of transforming higher education for all.

CONCLUSION: PUSHING FOR SOLIDARITY IN THE FACE OF DISINFORMATION

As this study shows, disinformation need not be always construed as a post-2016 informational problem that plagues us because of the technical capacity and reach of networked information systems. In this work, we clarify how disinformation happens at smaller scales, targeted to people who work within the three higher education institutions under study, and across rather ordinary information systems, like email, and websites. Studying these small-scale examples of disinformation using propaganda analyses to complement our CI study clarifies intents and structural power arrangements around disinformation within these institutions. It is common in information fields to study disinformation in terms of online environments (Fichman & Rathi, 2023; Ma & Bonnici, 2022; Zimdars, 2024), political partisanship (Chipidza & Yan, 2022), mechanisms of spread (Chong, 2020; Kitzie et al., 2018), and technical solutions (Asubiaro & Rubin, 2018; Ghosh & Shah, 2018; Morrow et al., 2022; Urban et al., 2018). While these represent the many valid ways to investigate and propose solutions for disinformation phenomena, the authors maintain that critical theoretical analysis can be a productive addition to analytical methods in information fields because it allows researchers to understand the dynamics of political and economic power as they manifest in disinformation in the cases at hand. Understanding how this power operates can be beneficial in both research into the *how* and *why* of disinformation spread and uptake, and in clearly conceptualizing the problem and solutions.

Further, this work underscores the ongoing crisis within American higher education. This investigation of the three case sites reveal how university management produces and disseminates disinformation to undermine solidarity that is integral for successful labor actions. The case studies exemplify how university management co-opts and purposefully misconstrues transformative demands that, at their core, call for the accessibility of higher education. Management seeks to obfuscate how these demands are grounded in the interrelated struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice, in tactics that are in line with Ahmed's (2004) non-performativity and Táíwò's (2022) elite capture. This is particularly clear in managerial messaging that framed labor actions and demands as antithetical to the university "community." Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann's (2023) information precarity highlights how the inaccessibility, or obfuscation, of information is tied to systems of power and inequality. Countering such harms requires solidaristic subversive practices. Extending this theorization of information precarity, this study explores how disinformation is an expression of hegemonic power to maintain the status quo of exclusion in US higher education. However, we understand disinformation as more than a mechanism of marginalization. Disinformation is also a form of propaganda wielded to protect the structural power of institutions. Echoing Espinoza Vasquez & Oltmann's information precarity, we situate propaganda analysis as a useful tool to examine disinformation and

obfuscation related to marginalization and exclusion in institutional contexts. This study supports Vasquez and Oltman's theorization that collective action is indeed a threat to the status quo of structural power.

AUTHOR ATTRIBUTION
First author: conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing. Second author: conceptualization, formal analysis, resources, project administration, supervision, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing

GENERATIVE AI USE
We confirm that we did not use generative AI tools/services to author this submission.

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