

Instituttets/senterets vurdering

Prosjekttittel:	Dissecting Fake News
Strategisk forankring	Prosjektet skal være en del av NFR prosjekt FAKENEWS. Prosjektet er meget godt forankret i satsningsområdet «Samfunnsutvikling og Demokratisering», med fokus på «endring i samfunn og kultur som følge av globalisering og teknologisk, demografisk, sosial, juridisk og økonomisk (og politisk) utvikling».
Gjennomstrømmingsevne (navn fullførte dr.gradskand.)	Forskningsgruppen har svært god gjennomføringsgrad av doktorgradskandidater med levering av avhandling innenfor 4 år (Randolph Wallace, Benjamin Schaller).
Forankring i fagmiljø	PhD'en skal jobbe innenfor et velutviklet forskningsmiljø innenfor internasjonal politikk med fokus på endringer i krig og fred, og siviles rolle innenfor konflikt. Forskningsmiljøet – «The Grey Zone» inkludere over 20 medlemmer (både hos UiT og utenfor), 5 prosjekter (2 NFR prosjekter inkl FAKENEWS, 1 EU prosjekt, 1 FD prosjekt, og 1 UiT/Result prosjekt), 3 PhD kandidater, og flere masterstudenter. «The Grey Zone» har solid erfaring med å støtte PhD kandidater, og integrere dem innenfor dette ytterlige fagmiljøet.
Rekrutteringsgrunnlag	Solid. Tidligere masterstudenter fra MPCT, statsvitenskap, samt nasjonalt og internasjonalt nettverk fra de to forskningsgruppene ved CPS: The Grey Zone og Peace research group
Kvalitet på søknaden (herunder evaluering av prosjekt/fagmiljø)	Søknaden har fått gjennomsnittskarakteren 7 svært god, og svarer svært godt på kriteriene i følge Norges forskningsråds vurderingspanel. PhD skal være en del av NFR prosjekt FAKENEWS som fikk topp karakter på alle feltene (7) av fagmiljøet.
Forslag til veileder(e)	Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv (hovedveileder)

Instituttets rangering av søknaden	<p>Søknaden er meget godt strategisk forankret i UiTs strategier med i satsningsområdet samfunnsutvikling og demokratisering», med fokus på «endring i samfunn og kultur som følge av globalisering og teknologisk, demografisk, sosial, juridisk og økonomisk (og politisk) utvikling».</p> <p>Søknaden er forankret i et meget godt fagmiljø nasjonalt og internasjonalt. Fagmiljøet har vist seg i stand til å utdanne doktorgradsstudenter. Prosjektet er evaluert av NFR og fått karakteren 7 svært god og har fått eksterne midler. Prosjektet fremstår som svært godt gjennomarbeidet, viktig, meget aktuelt og gjennomførbart.</p>

Disinformation and people: impacts on societal trust and resilience (FAKENEWS)

PhD project: Dissecting Fake News

Carl von Clausewitz claimed that the “moral factors” – the spirit of the people - are “the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade” of war (Clausewitz 2008: 185). Today, [a]ttacking an adversary’s most important center of gravity – the spirit of the people – no longer requires massive bombing runs or reams of propaganda. All it takes is a smartphone and a few idle seconds. And anyone can do it.” (Singer & Brooking 2018: 18). Trust and resilience are cornerstones of democracy (EPD 2017). The linkage between “the spirit of the people,” democracy (trust and resilience), and security warrants increased attention.

Disinformation has increasingly played a role in destabilising societies by targeting general populations and eroding *societal trust* (Filipec 2019). *Disinformation* is designed to increase doubt and *mistrust* between people and their governments as well as between groups of people within a society (Freedman et al 2021). Innovations in digital technology and the ways in which disinformation is able to intrude and influence people’s lives are often one step ahead of people’s or society’s *resilience*, or ability to resist or adapt to crisis and the consequences of crisis (Singer & Brooking 2018; Shu et al. 2020).

This PhD project will contribute to the newly launched, NFR financed, research project FAKENEWS, which further contributes to the research portfolio of “The Grey Zone” research group (uit.no/research/thegreyzone).

The FAKENEWS project question is the following:

FAKENEWS examines the ways in which people are either influenced or able to resist the power of disinformation, and further examines what role people have in contributing to societal resilience and overall security.

Thus the PhD project will ask:

To what degree do the aesthetics of disinformation contribute to its efficacy? And is it possible to recognize or identify particular or unique aesthetics of disinformation, for the purposes of developing trust and resilience in society?

What does fake news or more specifically disinformation look like? What is the fake news aesthetic if there even is one? Does it look like normal news? Does it try to create a perception of traditional credibility or does it deliberately avoid that to try to court credibility with a particular audience? What channels does it spread by? Does the choice of medium or platform dictate content or form, or are there broader trends that permeate through multiple platforms? Is it possible to determine to what degree disinformation – based on its content and aesthetics – poses a societal threat, leading to destabilization and insecurity in a society?

This project will include a comparative textual analysis of various fake news instances, towards developing a taxonomy of fake news to see its historical development. It will evaluate the ways in which aesthetics are used to target certain audiences with intersectional analytical tools, examining how gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, ableism, sexual orientation, and other constructions of power-embedded identities are integrated into the aesthetics of disinformation to increase potential efficacy and impact. The project will further assess what sorts of disinformation can be classified as “threatening” to society, how and why, and to what degree the aesthetics of disinformation contribute to threat creation.

This PhD will contribute to the FAKENEWS’ primary objective to generate a theoretical *resilience* framework allowing us to better understand how disinformation is created for manipulation, to better predict the impact of disinformation within society, and the possible weakening or strengthening of societal trust and measures to strengthen resilience.

The PhD project will address the following gaps in knowledge for the FAKENEWS project.

Gaps in knowledge:

1. We lack bottom-up, civilian-centric knowledge that can inform theories of societal trust, societal resilience, human and national security and how these further interact with, and impact, national security;
2. We lack knowledge about the relationship between media and people and the draw of disinformation, and how media contributes to strengthening or weakening the effects of disinformation, and societal trust;
3. We lack knowledge about how people perceive their own responses to crisis and to mis- and disinformation and their views on how societal trust operates;
4. Research too infrequently engages and cooperates with communities, especially after the completion of a project. We need mechanisms to continue the linkages between research and community, contributing to ongoing societal trust.

Overarching methodologies –intersectionality

The PhD project will draw from various social science methods within international relations/security studies, gender/intersectional methods and media studies. The main FAKENEWS project has as its objective a better understanding of the dynamics of peace in security in the context of disinformation. As such, this project will contribute to an ongoing dialogue within theories and methods in security studies, examining and developing understandings of “threat” in the context of disinformation. It will further draw on comparative textual analyses informed by intersectional methods.

To better understand the disinformation landscape the PhD project will examine the various positions or identities within society that can be vulnerable or resistant to disinformation. Intersectionality focuses on the experiences of people, and how identities shape experiences including fear, hatred, belonging, etc. It finds its roots in a critique of feminist approaches that were insensitive to the different experiences of women on the basis of race, class, orientation, ethnicity, and other markers of positionality that impacted their power and agency (Marfelt 2016; Crenshaw 1991). The project will use and develop intersectionality as a central analytical tool when examining the power dynamics of disinformation aesthetics in relation to the creation, maintenance, and strengthening of trust and resilience in a society. .

Potential for societal impact of the research project

The PhD project will contribute to answering crucial questions within the broader FAKENEWS project, and “The Grey Zone” research group. This PhD project builds on the work started by project leader and prospective supervisor Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv starting with the “Resilient Civilians” (NATO funded seed project) to better understand the roles of civilians during crisis and how they affect crisis, partnering with the Hybrid Centre of Excellence (Hybrid CoE) in Finland. Hoogensen Gjørsv was further invited to be a core theme leader on resilient civilians in the EU networking project EU-HYBNET, currently consisting of 25 partners examining different issues around hybrid threats and disinformation (launched May 2020). This groundwork has garnered significant attention, from Norwegian national actors like DSB and Ministry of Defence, to international actors like the NATO Defence College and CIMIC Centre of Excellence (The Hague, NLD). This PhD project, in cooperation with FAKENEWS will share data and analysis with the growing network of European agencies and research institutions both at NATO and the EU through the Hybrid CoE and the EU-HYBNET project, but also will impact research and planning in Norway through our links to societal security practitioners, government ministries and local communities. Finally, in keeping with expressed commitments by UiT The Arctic University of Norway, and the Centre for Peace Studies, to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), FAKENEWS explicitly addressed SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, combined with SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities and SDG 5 Gender Equality. Using intersectional analyses to expose the power dynamics between inequalities to better understand societal trust and resilience, FAKENEWS will contribute to strengthening mechanisms that support people-centric/democratic institutions and foster peace.