BIAP CONFERENCE
LIES, FICTION, AND MANIPULATION IN PROPAGANDA

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Mercè Rodoreda Building, Sala Polivalent (room 24.S18)
12–13 February 2026.

ABSTRACTS

Andrei Bespalov, *Universitat Pompeu Fabra*
Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Epistemic Disobedience: A Public Reason Perspective
Sometimes, thoroughly debunked and utterly preposterous fake news and conspiracy theories (FNACTs) paradoxically continue their presence in public political discourse. For those citizens who consider themselves subject to epistemic injustice, spreading such knowingly false FNACTs may be a way of engaging in epistemic disobedience. The latter is breach of epistemic norms in the name of presumably suppressed truth, for which the disobedients struggle to find more straightforward and empirically accurate ways of representation. I explore this practice from the normative perspective of Rawlsian public reason. In particular, I argue that epistemic disobedience by means of spreading FNACTs is publicly unjustifiable, however, under certain conditions, it can be excused.

Roger Canals, *Universitat de Barcelona*
Visual Trust and the Politics of Misinformation: A Cinematic Approach
In this talk, I will discuss the concept of "visual trust" in relation to current processes of misinformation, deceptive images, and false narratives in electoral processes. I will focus on the role of fact-checking agencies and their creative response to the spread of misleading content in the digital sphere. I will show some fragments of the film *A Matter of Facts* (Mihai Andrei Leaha and Roger Canals, 2026), still in post-production. In this regard, I will defend the importance of "studying images through images", that is, of using visual methods and modes of writing and dissemination to investigate contemporary visual culture in the political domain (for instance, to address the issue of disinformation and AI). This presentation is based on a long-term fieldwork mostly carried out by Mihai Andrei Leaha in Spain, Brazil and Romania within the frame of the ERC Project *Visual Trust* (2021-2027; PI: Roger Canals).

Constant Bonard, *Universität Bern*, **Filippo Contesi,** *Università Cagliari,* **Teresa Marques,** *Universitat de Barcelona*
The Effectiveness of Propaganda
Recent work on propaganda has questioned whether it is as effective in changing people's opinions as it has traditionally been thought. Notably, Mercier (2020) has argued that humans have in-built epistemic vigilance mechanisms that inoculate them from being gullible and thus being easily manipulated by propagandistic messages. However, we argue, the power of propaganda does not reside in people's gullibility alone. Indeed, the narrow focus on beliefs and epistemic rationality neglects how propaganda really works and conceals the fact that propagandists do not need people to be true believers.

We will point out that propaganda's ultimate goals are to manipulate people's conduct (cf. Hyska 2023 and Stafford 2024) and therefore propaganda can be effective in achieving its aims after all. We conclude by addressing the catastrophism many authors currently express at the epistemic threats posed by AI in propaganda. Also here, we advocate a realistic stance. First, even in the age of AI, people value and look for reliable sources, and, second, insofar as AI propaganda is effective, it is so for similar reasons to those of traditional propaganda.

Justin D'Ambrosio, *University of St. Andrews*
Conversational Trust
Trust is crucial to human communication. Without trust, communication as we know it would be impossible. But trust also makes us vulnerable — in conversation, it makes us vulnerable to linguistic manipulation. Most work on trust in linguistic exchanges has focused on trust's role in the transmission of knowledge via assertion — that is, on trust's role in testimony. Here, I develop and defend an account of what I call "conversational trust" that illustrates how trust is essential to many more aspects of conversation than is ordinarily appreciated. The account explains, on the one hand, how trust plays a crucial role in utterance interpretation, implicature calculation, presupposition accommodation, and discourse structure. It also explains, on the other hand, what makes audiences susceptible to a wide range of forms of linguistic manipulation. Conversational trust, on the view I develop, is akin to the presumption of cooperativity — it is the audience's prior or default confidence that the speaker's goals are aligned with their own. I go on to develop a formal model of such trust within the Rational Speech Act framework, and I discuss its role in effective propaganda.

Keith Raymond Harris, *Universität Wien*
Propaganda and Propagandists
A large body of academic work focuses on historical and contemporary instances of propaganda, and, in everyday life, allegations of propaganda are commonplace. Despite this, there is no consensus among scholars as to how precisely to define propaganda. Recent debates have focused, in particular, on whether propaganda is a pejorative term. I suggest that progress on this issue can be made by focusing more explicitly on propagandists. A propagandist, I argue, is one whose presentation of evidence is guided by a plan to persuade an audience to believe or act in ways favorable to a cause, rather than being guided by accuracy. Propaganda, in turn, may be understood through its connection to propagandists. So understood, propaganda consists in messages that are produced or disseminated as part of a plan to persuade an audience to believe, intend, or act in ways favorable to a collective cause, without being constrained by accuracy. I argue that the suggested definition of propaganda sheds light on various features of propaganda. This includes the sense that propaganda is defective even when it serves a good cause, the possibility of true propaganda, the fact that propaganda can be unwittingly spread, and the fact that propaganda regularly, but not invariably, plays on the audience's emotions.

Fabio Lampert, *Universität Wien*
Propaganda and the Arts of Coordination
Widely held views maintain that propaganda and ideology primarily operate by indoctrinating the masses. Yet evidence from sociology, anthropology, history, political science, and cognitive science suggests a different picture: despite appearances, widespread compliance and apparent consensus often coexist with skepticism, ambivalence, outright disbelief, and, at times, various forms of resistance. Moreover, although contemporary societies allow for the extensive transmission of ideological messages through mass media and digital platforms, there is little evidence that people are generally gullible or easily persuaded to act against their interests. But if propaganda rarely produces genuine belief, how and in what sense does it remain politically effective? We defend a coordination model for the function of propaganda. In democratic contexts, propaganda often functions as a coordination mechanism, enabling individuals who already share certain beliefs to act collectively by reducing the social and political costs of public expression. On this view, propaganda is better understood as a facilitator of collective action than as a technology of mass indoctrination. This view fits naturally with the interdisciplinary evidence adduced above.

Jessica Pepp, *University of Uppsala*
Insincerity and Mass Communication
This talk has two parts. First, I argue that the sincerity or insincerity of constative speech acts is not a matter of how speakers' propositional attitudes match up with what they intend to communicate. I make a case for this by appeal to situations in which people fail to recognize the same entity across different encounters (what are often referred to as "Frege cases"). In some of these cases, I argue, insincerity is compatible with the speaker's attitudes matching what they intend to communicate and sincerity is compatible with the speaker's attitudes conflicting with what they intend to communicate. I propose that the sincerity or insincerity of a speech act is instead a matter of the speaker's spontaneous and immediate reaction of assent or dissent. These reactions must be tightly coupled to the speech act and must not themselves be understood as propositional attitudes. In the second part of the talk, I explore how the view of sincerity and insincerity that emerges might apply to instances of mass communication, especially communicative acts undertaken by groups or organizations.

Tommaso Piazza, *Università degli Studi di Pavia*
Of Conspiracy Theories: A Novel Meta-Evidential Account
What distinguishes conspiracy theories from ordinary explanations involving conspiracies? This paper defends a moderate generalist account according to which conspiracy theories are epistemically problematic not because they posit conspiracies, but because of the specific role they assign to conspiratorial hypotheses in explaining the available evidence. After reviewing the debate between particularist and generalist definitions, I argue that a suitably constrained generalist approach is theoretically and methodologically preferable. I introduce a meta-evidential account that distinguishes between the causal role and the meta-evidential role attributed to conspiracies. On this view, a theory qualifies as a conspiracy theory not by attributing a causal role to a conspiracy, but by invoking it to explain the existence of the evidence itself — by treating the evidence as fabricated or manipulated by conspirators.

This meta-evidential structure also helps explain how conspiracy theories can function as effective instruments of propaganda, insulating preferred narratives from evidential challenge. The account clarifies how a theory may qualify as a conspiracy theory without assigning a causal role to a conspiracy, and vice versa, while allowing for status switches when new evidence emerges. Finally, I examine whether conspiracy theories so defined can ever be justifiably believed, and clarify the limited epistemic relevance of so-called "errant data."

Levan Sikharulidze, *Universitat de Barcelona*
Trusting Authoritarian Propaganda or Pretending to Trust It?
How do authoritarian propaganda systems succeed in shaping citizens' behavior when genuine trust and belief are absent? This talk argues that propaganda's effectiveness often operates not through belief formation, but by motivating a distinctive practical stance toward information — what I call *epistemic as-if trust*. Drawing on philosophical work on trust, acceptance, and testimony, I distinguish genuine epistemic trust, understood as a disposition to update one's beliefs in response to a source's testimony, from a condition in which agents knowingly lack such trust yet nevertheless act as if they are trusting the source. I argue that epistemic as-if trust does not aim at belief-updating, but at acceptance: agents treat testimonial content as a premise for action, coordination, and decision-making without believing it to be true. This framework helps explain how authoritarian propaganda can shape behavior even when official sources are widely distrusted, accounting for how citizens can nonetheless coherently engage with and act upon narratives they recognize as unreliable.