

Call for papers – Special Issue
Journal of Language and Discrimination
Guest Editors: Bronwen Hughes and Margaret Rasulo

Truth Value, Visual Evidence, and the Politics of Discrimination in Platformed Discourse

This special issue invites contributions on how truth value is attributed, contested, and put to strategic use through images in contemporary communication across platformed public spheres. Whenever a contrasting or diametrically opposed multimodal artefacts circulate as “evidence”, they become focal points for polarised and discriminatory conflict (Fairclough, 2001; Farkas & Schou, 2020). Of particular interest are cases where the same event yields divergent visual “proof”, and where competing communities, be they political, institutional, journalistic, or activist, fight over how visible cues are turned into evidence, and evidence into truth claims. Such dynamics have emerge in the circulation of contrasting images and interpretive frames following the recent deaths of Alex Pretti and Renée Good, with the same visual material repeatedly recontextualised to support incompatible accounts of what had effectively occurred.

The theoretical underpinning of this special issue draws on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS; KhosraviNik, 2017) operationalised mainly through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA; Machin & Mayr, 2023; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Submissions of research drawing on robust, self-standing methodologies, such as multimodal (inter)action analysis, multimodal conversation analysis, visual rhetoric, social semiotic analysis, and multimodal corpus methods, where these are applied critically to discrimination in platformed environments, are welcome. Within this analytical repertoire, these approaches enable a fine-grained examination of linguistic, visual, and interactional resources shaped by platformed affordances and constraints (Demata et al., 2018).

This is particularly pertinent given that contemporary truth-value disputes rest on evidentiality claims that treat images as self-evident proof, invoking a commonsense “what you see is what you get” epistemology. At the same time, such claims operate within a broader post-truth communicative environment, widely discussed since the mid-2010s, in which factual authority is unstable, trust in institutions is eroded, and visual material is mobilised both to assert truth and to undermine it. In this context, multimodal artefacts function paradoxically as anchors of certainty and as sites of contestation, making their circulation, recontextualisation, and uptake central to contemporary struggles over credibility.

It is precisely at the interface between the semiotics of visual evidence and recontextualised platformed trajectories that this special issue introduces the conceptual lens of the *tumbleweed effect* (Hughes, Rasulo, & Wodak 2025), whereby a news image travels across platforms and communities, leading to the accumulation of semiotic debris and the progressive reassignment of truth value, often with discriminatory intents.

In parallel, this special issue also encourages dialogue with the concept of bounded rationality (Simon, 1972) to account for how users, under conditions of limited attention and time, rely on heuristic readings of “visible evidence” and on socially circulated cues, often referred to as ‘cheap signals’ (captions, comment consensus, reposts). This is precisely why a tumbleweed-style accretion of these signals can so powerfully steer what gets accepted as true.

We therefore invite submissions addressing, among others, the following research areas, provided they are explicitly connected to processes of discrimination in digital environments:

- Platformed recontextualisation and circulation dynamics
- Image enhancement and AI-mediated evidentiality
- Discriminatory meaning-making through visual evidence

- Polarisation and framing of truth value through affective response (moral outrage, fear, empathy etc.)
- Ethnographic perspectives on affect in techno-discursive practices
- Counter-discourse, factchecking, and credibility repair in the circulation of polarised narratives
- Platform governance, moderation discourse and digital power relations
- Memes, GIFs, Emojis and discriminatory visual rhetoric in ideological positioning
- Image-based harassment and symbolic violence

Abstract submission

- Length: up to 500 words (references excluded)
- Language: English
- Send to: bronwen.hughes@uniparthenope.it and margherita.rasulo@unicampania.it

Important dates

- Abstract deadline: 15 April 2026
- Notification / invitation to submit full paper: 30 April 2026
- Full paper due: 28 February 2027
- Final submission: 30 July 2027
- Estimated publication: November 2027

References

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- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2020). *Post-truth, fake news and democracy: Mapping the politics of falsehood*. Routledge.
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- KhosraviNik, M. (2017). Social media critical discourse studies (SM-CDS). In J. Flowerdew & J. E. Richardson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies* (pp. 582–596). Routledge.
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