

Binghamton University

## The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)

---

Research Days Posters 2023

Division of Research

---

2023

### Epistemic Wrong in The Handmaid's Tale: A Literary Approach to Gendered Disinformation

Alyssa Figueroa

*Binghamton University--SUNY*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://orb.binghamton.edu/research\\_days\\_posters\\_2023](https://orb.binghamton.edu/research_days_posters_2023)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Figueroa, Alyssa, "Epistemic Wrong in The Handmaid's Tale: A Literary Approach to Gendered Disinformation" (2023). *Research Days Posters 2023*. 143.

[https://orb.binghamton.edu/research\\_days\\_posters\\_2023/143](https://orb.binghamton.edu/research_days_posters_2023/143)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Division of Research at The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Days Posters 2023 by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact [ORB@binghamton.edu](mailto:ORB@binghamton.edu).



# Gendered Disinformation and Epistemic Wrong in *The Handmaid's Tale*

BINGHAMTON  
UNIVERSITY  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Binghamton University, Source Project, Disinformation and Naivete

Alyssa Figueroa

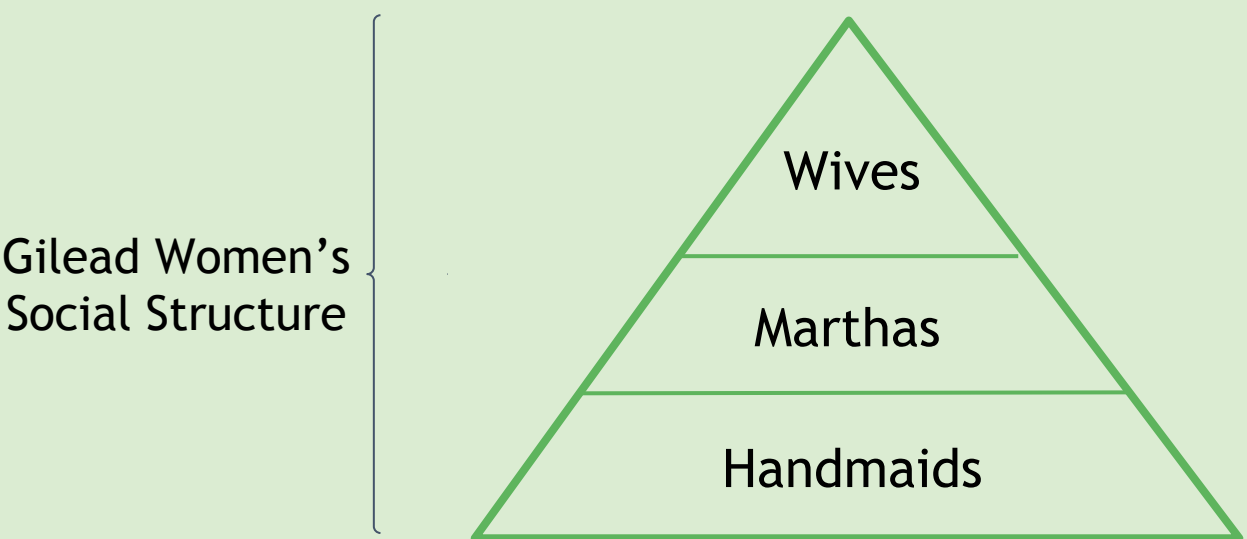
Alyssa Figueroa is a first-year student at Binghamton University enrolled in the Disinformation and Naivete stream of the Source Project.

## Disinformation in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The deprivation of bodily autonomy that women faced in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* sparked intense discourse due to recent real-world parallels. However, crucial factors that contributed to stripping these women of their rights often remain ignored: the disinformation and epistemic wrongs that first foundationally strengthen and then maintain the patriarchal totalitarian regime in the dystopia. Throughout the novel, Atwood utilizes rigid social structures women are forced to adhere to in order to highlight the systemic obstruction of a widespread revolution, which parallels the tactics used by modern-day gendered disinformation campaigns. Additionally, due to various cognitive stressors placed on women in the Gilead, they develop a desperation for any new information they can acquire, not bothering to determine the validity of said information. Atwood embodies this desperation by including multiple examples of individualized behavior that exists as evidence of it, such as the women’s habit of gossiping. The lack of context combined with the psychological struggle to grasp concrete conceptualizations of reality leads the main character, Offred, to constantly be unsure of what she truly knows, which is indicative of the epistemic harms and wrongs women are subject to in Atwood’s dystopia.

## Gendered Disinformation Campaign Tactics Used to Strengthen Totalitarianism

gendered disinformation “a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women” (Jankowicz et al.)  
gendered disinformation campaigns a coordinated attack against women that utilizes gendered disinformation tactics



The purposefully rigid setup of the social classes within Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays the oppressive and controlling conditions women endure in Gilead. **The social classes of women under the totalitarian regime are seemingly structured to complement each other, each category serving their own specific purpose, but instead they cultivate competition, resentment, and contempt within each household.** For example, the Wives and Handmaids exist in contrast to each other, with the Handmaids resenting the Wives for their luxuries, while the Wives resent the Handmaids for their physical relationship with their husbands and fertility, which makes them more valuable.

The production of these feelings of resentment and division is parallel in modern-day gendered disinformation campaigns. **A crucial component of these campaigns is the targeting of controversial feminist issues and creating internal conflict within the feminist community.** In contrast to disinformation campaigns based on race, in which the goal is to unite one race against others, **campaigns targeting women specifically strive to divide women by their social or economic class, values, and goals, preventing the establishment of a unified feminist movement (Bradshaw & Henle).**

The novel reveals how class divisions hinder the formation of a fortified revolutionary movement. **Women in Gilead are preoccupied with internal biases against women of different statuses, which further separates them from each other.** For example, Serena Joy, the main Wife in the novel, only provides Offred, the Handmaid narrator, with a picture of her long-lost daughter to ensure her cooperation with Serena's plan to get Offred impregnated by another man, a high-level crime within their society (Atwood, p. 189). Serena only extends this kindness out of desperation for Offred to provide her with a child and did not choose to ease Offred’s mental turmoil at any point beforehand because Serena had nothing to gain from it beforehand. This highlights how **most of the women within the Gilead fall victim to the effects of the class divides and tend to only display empathy or solidarity towards women of their same social class in order to destabilize the greater feminist movement and limit women’s ability to effectively participate in public discourse and politics.**



CREDIT: HULU

## Habitual Behaviors to Emphasize Epistemic Wrongs

“Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true..? Any news, now, is better than none.” (Atwood, p. 79)

gossip information that’s exchanged between two or more characters about someone else who is not present within the conversation  
cognitive success achieving some sort of success in terms of knowledge or understanding, such as making a discovery or conclusively establishing a theory (Steup & Ram)  
epistemic harm when an agent’s cognitive success is obstructed without the presence of mal-intent (Steup & Ram)  
epistemic wrong when an agent’s cognitive success wrongfully obstructed with the intent to harm (Steup & Ram)

The effects of the archaic social structure are further exacerbated by the individualized behavior the characters exhibit throughout the novel, specifically the habit of gossiping with one another. Gossiping is an integral part of these women's lives. Under the Gilead, women have a surplus of free time they weren’t accustomed to having in their daily life before the rise of the regime. Mental stressors combined with prolonged periods of solitude can push women to take drastic measures and end their lives to find reprieve from this empty lifestyle. Therefore, **gossiping acts as a means of cognitive stimulation and prevents women from falling into a state of hopeless depression or a boredom-induced psychosis.**

However, there exists one key issue in regards to the exchange of gossip throughout the novel: **the instances where gossip is utilized as a mode of gathering information occur during fleeting moments in which context that would be helpful in determining facts from falsities cannot be prioritized over the main points the women are trying to convey.** This exclusion of key context is what allows the habit to be treated as false context distorted information, which is defined as genuine information that lacks proper context when it’s disseminated (Wardle). Nonetheless, Offred is desperate for any new information she can gain access to, and the lack of context does not trouble her enough to quell her desperation.

Offred's relationship with the information she acquires throughout the novel highlights the lack of cognitive success achieved by women under the Gilead regime. For example, towards the end of Offred and Ofglen’s relationship, in the face of Offred’s budding secret relationship with Nick and her dwindling hope in the existence of any rebellion, she doesn’t believe Ofglen anymore. She thinks to herself, “I hardly listen to her, I no longer credit her. The things she whispers seem to me unreal.” (Atwood, p. 247). The case here is not that Offred discovered new information that led her to view Ofglen’s information as unfounded; instead, Offred is choosing to exist in a different version of reality because she never fully accepted the gossip she exchanged with Ofglen as fact in the first place. **Offred cannot discern whether or not she’s being told the truth when she talks with Ofglen meaning she cannot possibly be achieving cognitive success.**

**Offred is a victim of both epistemic harm and epistemic wrong:**

**Epistemic harm:** there isn’t any evidence that Ofglen has any intent to harm by forgoing key context, that is simply all she can afford to do within the short timeframes which they’re allotted to discuss.  
**Epistemic wrong:** occurs on a grander scale; the widespread censorship and overall oppression of women that’s facilitated by the Gilead prohibit most of the women from reaching cognitive successes. Of course, even if the regime claims it’s for the betterment of society, this comes with an intent to harm the status of women and ensure they will never fully understand the extent to which they’re being controlled and essentially conquered.

## Utilizing Literature to Expand Newly Founded Field of Disinformation Studies

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she portrays disinformation and epistemic wrongs that contribute to the maintenance of the Gilead, which are not simply fictional tools she utilizes to drive the plot, but real-world tactics that are used in contemporary society to oppress marginalized groups. Atwood’s use of rigid social structures and class divides highlights the importance of empathy and solidarity in resisting oppressive systems, two crucial sentiments that can be suppressed in the face of external controlling factors that try to foster attitudes in direct contradiction to them. The parallels between Atwood’s dystopian world and modern-day gendered disinformation campaigns are a stark reminder of the need for critical thinking and fact-checking in the post-truth era, starting with taking context into consideration. The desperation for any information that women in the Gilead experience ties into the struggle to achieve cognitive success that Offred exhibits throughout the novel, which is a reflection of the epistemic harms and wrongs that women experience in a patriarchal society that sets out to completely control them. Overall, *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a pre-internet example of a disinformation case study, long before the term gendered disinformation had been coined in scholarly circles, thus proving the merit of literature as a contributing agent to disinformation studies.

## Works Cited

- Claire Wardle, "Understanding Information Disorder." First Draft. September 22, 2020. (Last Accessed March 29, 2023). <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>.
- Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (McClelland and Stewart Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985), (digital ed. by Titivillus, 2018), ePub.
- Matthias Steup and Neta Ram, "Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020), (ed. by Edward N. Zalta): sec. 1.1 and 1.6.(Last Accessed: March 29, 2023). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/epistemology/>.
- Nina Jankowicz et al., “Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online” Media Report to Women Vol. 49, no. 2 (Spring 2021): p. 7. (Last Accessed March 29, 2023). <http://proxy.binghamton.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-lies-are/docview/2534642287/se-2?accountid=14168>
- Samantha Bradshaw and Amelie Henle, "The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations." *International Journal of Communication [Online]* (October 2021): p. 4603-4604. (Last Accessed March 29, 2023). <https://link-gale-com.proxy.binghamton.edu/apps/doc/A682564700/LitRC?u=bingul&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=0f3c84f4>.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Source Project Professor, Sidney Dement, for all his help in guiding me through the two semesters that culminated in this research project. Next, I’d like to acknowledge my fellow classmates who not only contributed to the final product of my project through valuable peer review and support, but also embarked on their own research endeavours that took extensive time and effort. Finally, I’d like to thank all those at Binghamton University’s Undergraduate Research Center who made the Source Project possible, allowing me, as well as other Humanities students, to participate in a research immersion program that typically only those within STEM fields of study get to experience.