

# Information Assault - Disinformation, Manipulation and Critical Thinking

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**ABSTRACT:** Challenges to forms of expression are bringing to the fore new types of language that seem to highlight the growing need for clarification of the sources referred to for authenticity of information. The classification of sources and information disseminators thus becomes an exercise that does not seem to be within the reach of decision-makers who are unfamiliar with the fundamental tools for constructing objective personal opinions. In order to correlate information with the set of beliefs or opinions - which often respond to a number of personal interpretations - misinformation, manipulation or objective interest in information are characteristics that define the categories that interact or are exposed to them. This paper examines these dynamics and emphasizes the importance of promoting robust critical thinking abilities.

**KEYWORDS:** information, disinformation, manipulation, critical thinking

## 1. Introduction

Challenges to forms of expression are bringing to the fore new types of language that seem to highlight the growing need for clarification of the sources referred to for authenticity of information. The general feeling is that apparently any statements or opinions expressed in different contexts or through different media can pass the filter of any checks on the quality of the claims, while the public or the consumer of information can become circumspect in the face of realistic criticism of the material disseminated while showing an exaggerated appetite for the so-called Englishness already assimilated in our language, fake news. Sorting out sources and disseminators of information thus becomes an exercise that does not seem to be within the reach of decision-makers who are strangers to the fundamental tools for constructing objective personal opinions. Forms of misinformation or apparent information with nuances that seem to have come more from the reality that corresponds to one's own perceptions or the degree of dissatisfaction generated by expectations and the drop in credibility generate positions that may conflict with objective reality.

The slogan "Information is power!" seems to go beyond any ethical norms concerning not only the quality of information, but also the way in which information is transmitted ends up being assimilated outside of any critical skills or qualitative filters regarding the information, the information deliverers or the intentions behind the data released into the public space. Subjectivity becomes a major criterion when information becomes transmitted and the target audience is the consumer pool that applauds the claims, the possible criticisms of opponents in different categories. The superficial acceptance of information also makes another category look at reality in the implacable form of a destiny set by structures or entities that have control over people's minds and decisions. Often it is not the arguments that reinforce a viewpoint but rather the source that disseminates the viewpoint or argument, the affinity for the source that originates the information overcoming all reasoning. All of these are aimed at a group or category loyal to the theories or information released while history is a "consequence of power plays between different groups" (Fry 2019, 63). The criticisms made can only inflame the opposing sides and the truth, the struggle for truth becomes the element invoked equally by both sides.

In order to correlate the information with the set of beliefs or opinions that often respond to a number of personal interpretations, keywords are once again drawn to sum up how the information is intercepted. In one form or another, the way in which the consumer of information

is exposed to it is confirmed by the time allocated to confirming one's beliefs, by the general information code that forms a template grid around which new concepts are constructed, and by the level of application of information by categories with corresponding analytical potential. Individualism becomes the personal mark of the group and expression and freedom of expression receive constructive values only within the group (Rotaru 2017, 545-550).

## 2. Misinformation or fake news through information

The term *fake news* can be described as information of questionable accuracy or misleading character. Misinformation as a way of transmitting information is considered to be the way in which news is spread, intentionally miscommunicated with the aim of causing harm. In most cases, misinformation and the spreading of false news are intended, among other things, to conceal the truth or to portray a person, an action or a set of facts in a negative light, all with a view to personal advancement and to minimizing any qualities of opponents. Bennett and Livingston (2020, 3) describe disinformation as "an intentional act of spreading falsehoods and misrepresentations through the news to advance political advantage, with the goals of advancing policy, discrediting opponents, disrupting public debate, influencing voters, igniting existing social conflicts, or creating a general background of confusion and information paralysis." The term fake news cannot be associated with a strict domain even though it can frequently be found in areas of interest. Although in many situations fake news is the result of current events, in many situations such news only fuels rumours that can trigger positions or interpretations that are not in line with reality. In order to give a high degree of credibility and to increase attention, fake news may be accompanied by template phrases such as: an investigation conducted by..., a report prepared by..., a study on which they collaborated.... Most of those interacting with the supposed investigations do not have a classification of the sources claimed which makes the critical factor not required. Such a result only strengthens the argument that "once accepted, false information is very difficult to correct and can continue to influence related beliefs even when people no longer support the false information that gave rise to those beliefs" (Greifeneder 2021, 2).

The sheer volume of information seems to trigger an exaggerated appetite for things that happen out of the ordinary, events or news stories in *prime time*. The progressive shift on types of information has brought society from the point where information was managed by large trusts that transmitted information content through the established forms, print, radio, television to the large-scale development of the internet which "marked the end of the traditional media monopoly on the means of filtering information" (Susskind 2019, 166). In this direction, this control over the information to be disseminated aims to create a certain ideology or conceptual lines that are often aimed at distinct categories of people, at high audience time slots, certain age segments, etc. The interest in audience, *ratings*, *likes* from data providers and the form of demonstrating loyalty and appreciation towards the source providing the news highlights the connection that goes beyond any critical or analytical forms of information.

The intentions that often lie behind the flow of information also demonstrate the demand response to certain types of searches. Societal polarisation, social structures or gender differentiation can highlight the way in which news is distributed or the space allocated to the topic in question. Disinformation can be supported by this way of communicating that some topics are more important than others or that certain categories are of interest or topicality than others. Against this background, the signal that can be given is that topics that focus on the presence and activity of men are more important than topics related to women's activity. In a study highlighting the presence of women in the press, it was found that articles describing issues related to women's work were framed in the context of pages with a predefined purpose. Thus, "women are in the majority on the back page and on those devoted to marginal topics such as utilities and services, celebrities and gossip, youth and education, health" (Grünberg 2005, 26).

According to a report published by IBM "about 90% of all information in the world today was created in the last four years" (Helfand 2016, 12). The ease of communication and the fast way information is transmitted has meant that distances are no longer an impediment to the spontaneity with which it is transmitted. The forms of interaction and reactions to the information transmitted prove that today's society is taking advantage of all available means to increase its knowledge performance while exposing itself to a "tsunami of misinformation that threatens to overwhelm rational discourse" (Helfand 2016, 12).

Faced with such a situation that reveals the limited capacity for critical evaluation of information, the media space becomes the platform where and through which real information is accompanied by questionable content that is appealing, engaging and offering in terms of topicality. Disinformation and the spread of fake news can develop the space in which distrust, scepticism and unresponsiveness can take hold in the consciousness of exponents of various individual or collective categories.

The variety of information has been classified into several categories describing or accompanied by problematic content:

- *Satire or parody*, which is not intended to cause harm, but has the potential to deceive.
- *False connections*, which occur when titles, images or subtitles do not support the content.
- *Misleading content*, which involves the deceptive use of information to frame an issue or person.
- *False context*, which is when genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
- *Imposter content*, which is when authentic news sources are spoofed.
- *Manipulated content*, which is generated when authentic information or images are manipulated to deceive.
- *Fabricated content*, which is new content that is completely false and designed to deceive and harm (Tara 2020, 4).

Regarding some of the characteristics describing certain categories in the list presented, some may seem harmless and without possible literal reactions and interpretations. However, the way in which information is received and then distributed describes the type and degree of influence found in social, ethnic or age groups which may overturn initial assumptions. While age may be a factor in how information is often sorted based on personal experiences, researchers at New York University "found that people over the age of 65 distributed seven times more misinformation on Facebook than their younger counterparts" (Tara 2020, 5).

Informational constructs are frequently fuelled by public opinion stances that take misinformative information and turn it into a weighty argument that goes beyond any susceptible form. In such situations, proponents of such information can form vocal groups that become opinion formers, sometimes the result of a whole cycle of information shared collectively in the common circle and on an individual level.

### **3. Manipulation through information**

The manoeuvrability with which words are accompanied using different techniques, the deterministic way in which these techniques can lead to initially intended results, the manipulation of different categories by stimulating emotions or by partial presentation of information leads to a form of morbid comfort in which the criteria of truth or reality are filtered only by those who convey it. The discussion around the terms brings two actions face to face; manipulation as a form of persuasion through various methods and a new place occupied in the public space by a new category generically called influencer. "The modern world has adopted the term influencer for people with a large social media following, capable of influencing others through their content" (Horn 2019, 11). The general framework that accompanies the term suggests that the influencer's job is to contribute to the emotional, moral, ethical, spiritual, and psychological good for those

going through situations characteristic of these states. In the same vein, they can influence the decisions of those who seem undecided about anything from clothing, treatments of various kinds, to holiday recommendations or solutions for family life (Rotaru 2011, 5), all while promoting a particular type of product or category of service. The examples given are obviously only indicative given the long list in which *influencers* are recommended as some who have solutions alongside the unadvised have inadvertently passed by.

At first glance, the profile of *influencers* appears to be harmless since all their intentions are aimed at the good of those who are looking for life-saving solutions. Most often influencers draw on experiences that highlight their own success in the particular area under discussion while other experiences are overlooked or avoided. Failure or vulnerability are not topics that are emphasised. One's own image of how others can experience similar experiences must go beyond moral or familial gaps, personal example is only fragmentary because "the *influencer* places his or her own interest first" (Horn 2019, 11) and often the interest is a financial one determined by the category of products or services advertised. However, the constant effort of the search often overrides all these aspects that should be defining in the way actions change. *Influencers* are public figures, celebrities, people who, because of the ethical aspect that determines their actions, are not seen as manipulative.

In a way that goes beyond the deliberate intentions of the *influencers* the information that is disseminated on different media platforms determines in one way or another different forms of action. The types of human reaction to subliminal messages come to be assimilated without the constant effort of characters promoting a certain type of product or encouraging an empathetic, sacrificial or new way of life. Constant exposure to subjects, "repeating the same beliefs, ideas or thoughts to another person, repeatedly, leads to them changing their ideas to the repeated ideas. And this repetition leads to appropriation of the intended idea or action" (Goleman 2020, 46).

Manipulation by means of information aims to change the decisions of others in the interests of the individual. The means used, the methods that accompany the actions are aimed at exploitation and physical and mental control which creates synonymous terms within the same major theme, mind control, terms such as "brainwashing, thought reform, manipulation, exploitative persuasion, socio-psychological manipulation, behavior change technology" (Moore 2020, 46). While in the case of influence information can be framed in terms of changing decisions or shaping them without human dignity (Rotaru 2016, 29-43) being diminished or abused, the act of manipulation and the manipulative agent can resort to methods that transcend any principledness.

Manipulation is regarded as "a form of intentional influence characterized as an attempt by one person or party (the manipulator) to change the behavior of another person or party (the target), usually with a view to achieving a goal in the interest of the manipulator" (Horn 2019, 75). Throughout this process, manipulation through information is accompanied by the promotion and highlighting of exaggerated personal or group qualities to the point of minimizing and annihilating any rights to opinion of the opposing category or person. Manipulation aims to suppress any right of reply or dialogue, including by instilling fear through threats.

Forms of manipulation, known generically as forms of control in dark psychology, manifest both personally and collectively alongside mind control or other forms of physical and psychological control. On a personal level the manipulator may use methods such as blackmail, emotional pressure or deception. Considered as personality traits with manipulative characteristics, narcissism, Machiavellianism or manifestations of psychopaths and sociopaths are differentiated by the way they "choose to share their feelings and the image they will pose to protect themselves" (Shorts 2019, 15).

On the other hand, collective manipulation through information is concerned with masses or categories of people and information represents topics or expectations shared by the manipulated groups. Economic or social crises (Bâlc 2016, 375-388), ethnic tensions (Rotaru 2006, 251-266) or generalized discontent create the background against which people can sometimes unwittingly

find themselves in such circles where control is not generated by blackmail, pressure or deception but rather by stimulating discontent and offering exclusive solutions. All this will be exploited for the benefit of the manipulating group while information can take on forms whereby deprivation, shortcomings, acute crises of national or ethnic identity are accentuated and the solution offered is acceptance of guidance towards a utopian future.

#### 4. Critical thinking

The plethora of information that is released through the various media may be accompanied by nuances that distort a factual situation, an action, or through the same sources, information that may be outside reality is transmitted. The influences and messages conveyed are accompanied by signals that promise to restore self-esteem, emotional release and professional success. Manipulative information comes to speculate that niche of vulnerability that can turn in favor of those who know and can speculate the weaknesses generated by the social condition of people with minimal or subminimal income, low intellectual level, identity crises, religious themes or cultural particularities. In such an environment the possibility of delivering disinformation, fake news or manipulative tendencies becomes accessible to individuals or groups seeking long-term benefits. The zone of ambiguity of experientially formed categories allows for the promotion of information only through the pronounced form of the argument based on the tone and variations of voice, with conviction being given by the emotional resonance of the listener.

Critical thinking, therefore, is the action that precedes opinion formation or decision-making. This type of thinking develops outside of *cognitive bias*, characterized by the inability to process information without being influenced by one's own thoughts or past experiences. In other words, the influence of one's own constructs developed at the level of thinking is the basis for interpreting present data or situations which will ensure knowledge without analysis and offer the possibility of another perspective. Such an analytical pattern is one that does not support transformations or forms of interpretative improvement of information outside the interpretive pattern which makes such a way of thinking to be considered a failure in relation to clear thinking, "or what experts call "a cognitive error", a systematic deviation from logic - from an optimal, rational and reasonable way of thinking and behaving" (Dobelli 2014, 11).

The analysis of information is not carried out on the basis of a critical apparatus but rather according to preconceived interpretative rules. Critical thinking can move beyond fitting information into one's own interpretive grid through an analysis of "all possibilities with positive and negative outcomes before reaching a final decision" (Holm 2015, 11). In such a context, the only informational arguments are those that overlap with one's own perspectives, reinforcing more and more beliefs and acting more and more reserved in the face of any other possible solutions or interpretations. The comfortable zone where all information is accepted and everything responds to the same stimuli becomes the environment where people encounter the same set of beliefs and where no other possibilities can penetrate, known as the *echo chamber*.

The two states, *bias* and *echo chamber*, can limit participants' growth, understanding, and progress, seen as a hindrance to "exploring potentially beneficial opportunities, whether in politics, religion, social issues, or everyday life" (Bennet 2023, 21). This type of reaction in the face of clear evidence that would contradict one's own beliefs that turn out to be shaky and lacking in valid argument is called by Rolf Dobelli (Swiss author and entrepreneur. He holds an MBA and PhD in philosophy from the University of St. Gallen) as "contagious bias, in which participants are unable to ignore the definite connection they feel to some elements, either from past experience or from indirect situations" (Dobelli 2014, 120) and in the tone of the title of the book of the mentioned author, thinking clearly is an art.

## 5. Conclusion

Every day brings a volume of information to which each person contributes in one form or another. Either we are receivers of information, or we are people who pass on what we have heard in turn, what we believe or think. Events ranging from personal relationships to events capturing global developments are accompanied by more or less objectivity. The points of view from which events are analyzed can be presented from nationalist, globalist (Rotaru 2014, 532-541), extremist, traditional, conservative perspectives and all this information ends up forming patterns of thought or analysis often as a result of one's own opinions to be correlated with the convenient type of information. In such situations, the attempt is to find correspondence in the broadcast material that validates previously established beliefs. The way or manner in which these beliefs have been constructed may go unnoticed since the arguments find supporters and adherents along the same line of thought.

The substance of the information can sometimes be compromised by subjectivity or intentional forms of exaggeration or downplaying of a reality. Obviously, this aspect should not be generalized, but on this general information content the need for an objective perspective (Rotaru 2015, 318-322) and experienced critical thinking can avoid the assimilation of misinformative or misleading news and even more the danger of manipulation, even media manipulation.

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