

A Note on Misinformation - Roslyn Fuller

At a recent presentation I did at UCL, a question from a member of the audience concerned my simultaneous criticism of NGOs for producing false misinformation and my contention that misinformation is an overblown moral panic. In other words, I am annoyed that so many NGOs and other 'experts' produce misinformation (including, first and foremost, about the concept of misinformation itself) and yet I believe that the threat misinformation poses to democracy has been entirely exaggerated.

In hindsight, I can see how this could be confusing, so will explain myself in more detail.

The general tenor of commentary on misinformation focuses on the ability of simply viewing information to change the viewer's opinions and perceptions of reality. Indeed, many studies on 'misinformation' suffer from several flaws: one is that anything the writer themselves views as irritating is instantly categorized as 'misinformation' thus biasing the results; two is that often studies merely capture how often a piece of misinformation has been viewed or (if on the internet) clicked on. The researcher then bewails the incredible reach of such misinformation the same way they, only a few years ago, bewailed the number of people clicking on stories about 'twerking' or pop music. If more people googled 'Miley Cyrus – twerking' in 2012 than 'Edward Snowden – surveillance' this was, at the time (real story), said to be incontrovertible proof that twerking was a more important topic to people than surveillance was. This sentiment, which has everything to do with wishful thinking, and little to do with reality, depends on people valuing this information equally. It would be entirely possible for a forty-year-old reader to, having caught up with the Snowden revelations on the morning paper, decide that they needed to get to the bottom of 'what this twerking thing is all about' and google it. This is far from a declaration from that person that both things are equally important.

This same tactic has been washed, rinsed and repeated for misinformation generally, except in an even more extreme version: if people view a piece of information then they must agree with that information. If I view a social media post that aliens have landed, I will believe that aliens have landed. If I view a social media post that a certain model is the sexiest woman alive, I will believe that she is the sexiest woman alive.

With the exception of the extremely gullible (single digit figures), no one works this way.

The only misinformation that is actually effective at influencing people's opinions is overwhelming, sustained misinformation, preferably about hard to verify topics. For example, let's say that the US government decided to convince people that the planet Neptune never existed, and that the fact that we thought it existed was the result of some kind of previous misunderstanding. Yes – you could probably get away with that. Closer to home, governments have some, more limited, success convincing people that conditions in other countries are much worse than in their own, even if they aren't. Even here, however, it is fascinating that many people who essentially believe this, will still attempt to verify this information with people they meet from said countries. In other words, even where they essentially believe this misinformation, and the truth doesn't even affect them that much one way or the other, they will still attempt to verify if presented with an opportunity to do so. You really, really have to snow people in with misinformation for it to be effective. It takes a very concerted effort, so only an entity that has a lot of power and resources in the area concerned would even be able to attempt such a thing.

Less ambitious targets, like moving people's opinions somewhat based on content they have only just viewed before being surveyed is possible, but it is limited in its impact. For example, if you get people

to view newscasts which have been doctored to lend greater importance to an issue, and then ask them very soon after this what the biggest issues are in the country today, you can move the dial on that, mainly because you have succeeded at putting those issues at the top of people's minds. However, you can't move the dial from 0-100 that way, nor does the effect last for all that long.

Thus, I object to the view of people as ignorant and gullible and the need to patrol the internet for every stray piece of information which may be false.

However, this doesn't mean that you can't still cause a lot of issues by intentionally spreading misinformation or doing what I regard as much the same: saying something you have no reason to believe is true with great confidence while labelling yourself an expert. And indeed, many organizations, including many NGOs engage in this behaviour, which creates issues for entirely different reasons. Often this information is so ludicrous that few, if any, actually believe it. Instead, it provokes outrage and also just jams up the conversation. I've often been amazed at the many people willing to devote years of their lives to chasing down and disproving the flippant lies of other people who clearly enjoy lying and are never going to stop. It's really a zero-sum game.

If people *did* believe all of the misinformation out there, they'd be a lot happier. Indeed, they'd all just be spinning around like little weather-vanes, implicitly believing the last thing they read.

But since people don't believe everything they read or hear, every piece of egregiously superficial, silly information out there just annoys them. And it's annoying enough when it comes from some random idiot, but it is positively offensive when it comes as an official announcement from newspapers, governments or NGOs. Indeed, people often ask at this point: '*How stupid do they think we are?*'

To give but one example, at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, current Taoiseach (prime minister) and then health minister of Ireland Simon Harris told a radio show with complete confidence that there would likely not be a vaccine for covid-19 anytime soon. After all, according to Harris, there had been 18 other previous covid viruses (hence the name 'covid-19' according to Harris, *Minister of Health*) and a vaccine had not been found for any of them. This kind of thing really annoys people and damages any faith in experts of any kind. When you hear something like that, you realize there's a pandemic, and also, you are on your own. You really need to get more paranoid and skeptical of information. And a lot of people have taken that skeptical route over the past several years (some of them too far).

This is why I believe there *is* a negative effect of misinformation, I just disagree on what that effect is and who the main perpetrators are. The number of people instantly hoodwinked by viewing misinformation online is fairly negligible (and indeed scamming the extremely gullible precedes the internet and arguably has far more severe consequences in real life (cults, etc.)). Instead, the often careless attitude of NGOs, governments and media figures in egregiously failing to fact-check their statements, resulting in those statements becoming the subject of hot disputes, which inevitably, in turn, causes skepticism (healthy and unhealthy) to rise, is by far the bigger issue. Yes, it is resolvable by open debate (which is what I was trying to do on some topics during that presentation), but it is creating a lot of work for mythbusters, which could be easily avoided, and if they would simply stop shooting their mouths off, we could all focus on more closely examining genuine misinformation and that which veers into criminally relevant.

