



## Commentary

## Combatting Misinformation Requires Recognizing Its Types and the Factors That Facilitate Its Spread and Resonance



Aaron M. McCright<sup>a,\*</sup>, Riley E. Dunlap<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Michigan State University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Oklahoma State University, United States

As sociologists who have studied organized climate change denial and the political polarization on anthropogenic climate change that it has produced in the US since the late 1990s (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2000), we have closely followed the work of Lewandowsky and his collaborators over the years. Like them, we have observed how the “climate change denial countermovement” (Dunlap & McCright, 2015)<sup>1</sup> has employed the strategy of manufacturing uncertainty—long used by industry to undermine scientific evidence of the harmful effects of products ranging from asbestos to DDT and especially tobacco smoke (Michaels, 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2010)—to turn human-caused climate change into a controversial issue in contemporary American society. And, like Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) in “Beyond Misinformation,” we view these past efforts as key contributors to the present situation in which pervasive misinformation has generated “alternative facts,” pseudoscience claims, and *real* “fake news”—a “post-truth era” indeed.<sup>2</sup>

The current state of affairs has provoked much consternation among academics and journalists in the US and beyond. For example, scholars have organized initiatives (e.g., the University of Sydney’s Post-Truth Initiative), conferences (e.g., “The Press and the Presidency in the Post-Truth Era” at the University of

Nebraska, Lincoln), workshops (e.g., “Seeking Truth in a ‘Post-Truth’ World” at Bethel University), speaker series (e.g., “Media and Politics in a Post-Truth Era” at Furman University), and courses (e.g., “Calling Bullshit” at the University of Washington) to interrogate misinformation in the present era. Several recent books (e.g., Tom Nichols’s *The Death of Expertise* in 2017) try to explain the routine disrespect of facts and declining authority of science across society. Popular periodicals feature cover stories or special issues devoted to the conspiracy theories and alternative facts that contribute to America’s “post-truth moment” (e.g., September 10, 2016 issue of *The Economist* and September 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*). And, of course, journalists struggle daily to make sense of a sitting US President routinely dismissing stories, journalists, and entire outlets as “fake news.” Within this context, we widen our scope beyond climate change denial to discuss misinformation more generally and, in doing so, offer a sociological response to Lewandowsky et al. (2017), aimed at complementing and extending their analysis.

We broadly agree with most of what Lewandowsky et al. (2017, p. 4) write, and as sociologists are especially pleased to see them emphasize the “larger political, technological, and societal context” in which misinformation has evolved and must be addressed. Nonetheless, we are skeptical of the efficacy of their “technocognition” approach for combating the growth of misinformation in the US, as will become clear. Before we briefly identify the factors that amplify some types of misinformation more than others later in our essay, we devote most of our attention to presenting a conceptual framework for describing key

<sup>1</sup> We also refer to this as the “climate change denial machine” (Dunlap & McCright, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that the Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” as their 2016 Word of the Year.

### Author Note

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\* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aaron M. McCright, Michigan State University, United States. Contact: [mccright@msu.edu](mailto:mccright@msu.edu)

types of misinformation by selected characteristics of their messengers. While all misinformation can be problematic, some types seem more consequential and may be more challenging to combat than others. That is, strategies that may prove effective at countering or neutralizing one type of misinformation may not work against others (and may even backfire)—especially when we consider the particular combinations of social, political, and economic factors that facilitate the differing types of misinformation. Given this, and mindful of space limitations, our final section offers a few suggestions for future work.

### Key Types of Misinformation

We can arrange the conceptual space of misinformation along two dimensions. One is a messenger's ontological position on truth and facts, which ranges from strong realism (i.e., acceptance that truths exist external to your mind and a respect for facts) to strong constructivism (i.e., agnosticism about or even disbelief in the existence of external truths and a disrespect of facts). The other dimension is a messenger's typical rhetorical style and primary audience, which ranges from an informal, conversational style directed toward people's daily lives (i.e., lifeworlds) to a formal, persuasive style aimed at institutions and systems. Combining these two dimensions produces four ideal-types of misinformation: truthiness, bullshit, systemic lies, and shock-and-chaos (see [Figure 1](#)). As with all models and frameworks, ours simplifies reality for the purpose of presentation and interpretation. In actuality, the boundaries between quadrants are porous, and some messages may feature multiple types of misinformation simultaneously—depending on the audience, context, and life course of the message.

Truthiness occupies the top left quadrant in [Figure 1](#). The intellectual foundations of truthiness are found in popular (mis)readings of the works of French postmodern philosophers and British science and technology studies (STS) scholars since the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Briefly, these academics aimed to challenge and “deconstruct” the hegemonic power structure of Western science, which has supported patriarchal capitalism and white supremacist colonialism since the Enlightenment. In pursuing a Leftist political agenda of critiquing the political and moral authority of Western science, empowering historically marginalized peoples, and legitimizing indigenous knowledge, they argued that what we consider as scientific facts and knowledge are essentially the result of ongoing social processes of negotiation among many claims-makers, none of whom have privileged access to complete truth. Yet, popular (mis)readings of their works, which have mobilized troops in the so-called “science wars,” have led many people to (mis)interpret their key argument as promoting an extreme relativism whereby all actors' claims are *equally* valid and accepted “facts” are the outcomes of power and epistemic procedures.”<sup>4</sup>

Occurring in parallel was the rise of identity politics in the US, initially on the Left since the mid-1960s but perhaps just as prominently on the Right in recent years. Combining identity politics and the postmodern arguments above helps produce truthiness, in which “facts” and “reality” are things some people feel—rather than know—to be true. Nowhere is this so poignantly described than in the October 17, 2005 pilot episode of *The Colbert Report*. As his conservative character (a parody of Fox News's Bill O'Reilly), Stephen Colbert coined the term “truthiness”<sup>5</sup> as something you just feel to be true:

*Anybody who knows me knows that I'm not fan of dictionaries or reference books. They're elitist, constantly telling us what is or isn't true or what did or didn't happen. . . . I don't trust books. They're all fact and no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. 'Cause face it, folks, we are a divided nation. . . . We are divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart.*

Thus, truthiness is an emotional, non-cognitive form of radical constructivism; it is simply feeling something to be true without the need for reasoned argument or rigorously collected and analyzed empirical evidence. Popular purveyors of truthiness include such famous conservative media personalities as Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Glenn Beck. Even as they spread their messages across society, they aim for a highly personal connection with their audience. For some media organizations like Fox News and the Sinclair Broadcasting Group, truthiness is the coin of the realm.

The top right quadrant is the domain of “bullshit” (BS), for which we turn to Harry Frankfurt's (2005, p. 61) famous definition: “The liar cares about the truth and attempts to hide it; the bullshitter doesn't care if what they say is true or false, but rather only cares whether or not their listener is persuaded.” BSing, then, is a rather personal and typically self-serving form of dishonesty, with its purveyors treating information so cavalierly that they seem to have a fundamental disrespect for reason and rules of evidence.<sup>6</sup> Prevalent here are the kinds of conspiracy theories that thrive on the internet and are peddled by outlets like Alex Jones's Infowars and Steve Bannon's Breitbart News. Self-professed “truthers” seem to have turned BSing into a vocation (e.g., [Kay, 2011](#); [Leibovich, 2015](#)): 9/11 truthers, Sandy Hook truthers, and citizenship truthers (aka, “birthers” who challenge the established fact that President Obama is a natural born citizen).

Perhaps the most infamous BSer of our age is President Donald Trump, who spreads it so frequently and effortlessly that observers are challenged to keep up. He enlists a revolving door of personnel whose primary role is to justify his spoken and

strong relativism to deny and/or avoid responsibility for problems like climate change. And quite recently, the emergence of the post-truth era has stimulated debate among STS scholars over the field's role in contributing to it (e.g., [Collins et al., 2017b](#); [Fuller, 2017](#); [Sismondo, 2017a, 2017b](#)).

<sup>5</sup> Merriam Webster named “truthiness” as their 2006 Word of the Year.

<sup>6</sup> Male politicians figure prominently in this quadrant, especially when managing personal scandals (e.g., John Edwards, Mark Sanford, and Anthony Weiner).

<sup>3</sup> The former include the likes of Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, while the latter include such scholars as David Bloor, Barry Barnes, Harry Collins, Steve Fuller, and Trevor Pinch.

<sup>4</sup> Over a decade ago [Latour \(2004\)](#), a prominent STS scholar, acknowledged the field as having contributed to a situation in which powerful interests exploit

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