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Commentary

The Distributed Influence of Misinformation

Colleen M. Seifert*

University of Michigan, United States

Lewandowski, Ecker, and Cook (2017) have presented a wide-ranging argument aimed at "understanding and coping with the post-truth era." Their claim is that misinformation is growing, and its scientific study must be considered "within a larger political, technological, and societal context." The authors place the blame for the post-truth world on (historical) "societal megatrends" that underlie current political differences and growing distrust.

Current psychological accounts of misinformation take place "in the head," with the scope of processes defined as occurring within an individual mind. The continued influence effect (Johnson & Seifert, 1994) describes misinformation in terms of information input, connections within memory, comprehension of later corrections, and finally, retrieval of misinformation. The location of misinformation was posited based on accessible knowledge in an individual's memory. In this target article, Lewandowski et al. (2017) argue that we must broaden our account of misinformation in order to capture its true scope. They call for a new approach that accounts for misinformation *within* the head as a consequence of processes occurring *between* individuals, groups, political trends, societies, historic time periods, and technologies, which they term "technocognition."

The article makes a case for important changes in the processing of information in the "post-truth" world. While examples of "societal megatrends" are cited, it is not clear from these trends that the *qualities* of misinformation have changed. There have always been "fringe" thinkers, fractionation in media, heterogeneous audiences, and growing inequality, deindividuation, and anonymity (e.g., in the move of population to cities). I argue that what must be added to our understanding of misinformation in the post-truth era is our *experience* of misinformation.

Has Experiencing Misinformation Changed?

The importance of technology in concert with cognition is evident when comparing how we experience misinformation today compared to twenty years ago. In 1996, Google did not exist; we "dialed up" to the internet, and it had just over 100,000 websites on offer (http://royal.pingdom.com/2008/09/16/the-web-in-1996-1997/). Twenty years ago, people found information (and misinformation) in the nightly national TV news broadcasts, local newspapers, workplaces, and friends and acquaintances who provided a "personal take" on the news of the day. The authors argue that there was less misinformation then, but arguably, there was also less information presented to the individual. More of us shared our information encounters with the same few sources (e.g., the big three TV networks and national magazines). In addition, these sources were corporations with established, well-known reputations. Remember the "corrections" printed in every newspaper? (Amster & McClain, 2002).

Today, all that is changed: We now have apparent "equal access" to information from all varieties of sources through the internet. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* is no longer the expert on information, replaced by an expert we can endorse (ourselves on *Wikipedia*). Information presented on *Facebook*, *Youtube*, and *Twitter* now looks the same no matter where it came. Carefully

Author Note

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Colleen M. Seifert, University of Michigan, 530 Church St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1043, United States. Contact: seifert@umich.edu

reported, vetted, and edited articles from the *New York Times* are now shown in your *Facebook* newsfeed alongside blog postings from random strangers, political ads, and office cooler humor. In the cacophony of information coming through our screens, our *intentions* as information seekers are no longer needed. The Facebook user may be interested in learning, laughing, communing, or buying at any given point in time, and there need be no intent of steering toward the newsmagazine sources now and the Mad Magazine content later; instead, we passively watch the stew of postings flow by, designed to entice our interest in any direction.

In the past, an important part of the experience of misinformation was the *salience* of the source. Talking heads were individuals known to us, and newspapers, magazines, movies, and TV shows of varied stripes had distinct access points. Pornography never appeared unless we chose to venture behind the screened-in area of the video rental store. There was also a cost for desired information access as a subscriber or patron. We chose our information sources, recognized their qualities, and developed loyalties: *Time* versus *Newsweek*, *Phil Donahue* versus *Oprah, Fridays* versus *SNL*. Other information came firsthand, from actual people we talked to—teachers, postal workers, sales clerks, and neighbors—so that we quickly learned whom to listen to and whom to avoid. Before the post-truth era, we did not have to be warned to "consider the source"—the sources were distinct, intentionally accessed, and literally in our (face to) faces.

The Cacophony of Misinformation

In the current world of (mis)information, can a careful consumer of information "consider the source?" Even if you seek higher quality information, how can you find it in your *Facebook* feed? Let's consider a shared example: The target article includes cited scientific sources meant to confirm the examination of evidence. But consider the variety of sources from Lewandowski et al. (2017), including the *Lancet*, *PloS ONE*, *Climatic Change*, *Cosmopolis*, and the *Journal of Happiness Studies.* Can an individual scientist be knowledgeable about quality and peer review status across these varied outlets? It is even more challenging to consider some of the web sites cited as sources:

(1) http://www.climatefeedback.org
(2) http://www.independent.i.e./business/media/google-backs-irish-academics-fakenews-fight-35903839.html
(3) https://www.recode.net/2016/12/9/13898328/pizzagate-poll-trump-voters-clinton-facebook-fake-news
(4) http://www.people-press.org/2009/07/09/public-praises-science-scientists-fault-public-media/
(5) http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/

Which of these links is associated with the (widely respected) PEW Foundation? Even if you are fairly knowledgeable about the new media, it is difficult to even determine the source from the citation. Why are we choosing a convention for citing source information using a code designed to be readable by machines, but not by people? Since we cannot discriminate among sources, it is not surprising that our cognitive processes for detecting and processing misinformation are overwhelmed. Worse, we do see the occasional source we know is legitimate, and then feel proud we are such avid information seekers! In the post-truth era, nothing is salient, and everything is equally loud.

When using tools like *Facebook* as sources of information, we explicitly throw out our previous notions of source quality, reputation, cost (reflecting its value), and perspective (such as the opinions of a known editorial board). While printed matter was previously viewed as more authoritative ("after all, someone published it"), anyone can now produce their own book. And now that anyone can "publish" their work on the internet, we have discovered another truth: "We've all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually reproduce the entire works of Shakespeare. Now, thanks to the Internet, we know this is not true." (Robert Wilensky, 1996; https://www2.eecs.berkeley.edu/Faculty/Homepages/wilensky.html)

This information is replaced by a new metric for determining what we "need to know"—that is, what my friends "like." *Facebook* presents (mis)information depending on whether it is consonant with our beliefs. We are literally seeing different information depending on our social circles' judgments of what makes a post "likeable." These networks of "people like us" produce extreme categorizations of differences among individuals and produce predictable patterns of preferences and behaviors. We are never challenged with novel information, but instead rehearse our current world views through further elaborative associations. And it's cognitively comforting, just like watching reruns of sitcoms. Information we agree with spools out without making us think, sitting in the "sweet spot" of assimilation ("Right on! I agree!") without accommodation (actually changing our minds) (Piaget & Cook, 1952).

The authors conclude that corrections are more successful if they do not directly challenge our worldviews; however, those views are captured only as a large associative network of *Facebook* "friends" rather than identified belief statements. The network of "liking" does not define the content of what I care about; instead, it defines only my similarity to others. Through the Facebook algorithm, I define myself through similar "likes" without any attempt to characterize the basis for that similarity. It may predict very well which links I click on, but it provides little information about my views that can be used to tailor corrections. So, it is not clear how many of our current conceptions of "what works" in correcting misinformation will apply to the post-truth experience.

The End of "Good Faith"

As Lewandowski et al. (2017) point out, the importance of recognizing the post-truth era is that the "rules of the (information) game" really have changed. The problem of misinformation was originally defined within a benign world where sources gave out facts believed to be true, and corrected them as necessary. In communication, these assumptions were defined by Grice (1989) to account for interactions between speakers communicating in good faith. For example, the maxim of

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