

Misinformation About Misinformation

“Nazis run Ukraine.” “Biden stole the election.” “You can cure Covid by injecting bleach.” “Lizardmen run the world.” These statements aren’t merely false; they are “misinformation” that endangers democracy and the world.

Or so I keep hearing. My question: What exactly is the mechanism of misinformation supposed to be? For the critics, the story seems to be roughly:

1. Self-conscious liars make up absurd lies to advance their agendas.
2. Some listeners believe whatever they say.
3. Some of these listeners repeat what they hear, sparking a cognitive contagion effect.
4. Other listeners ignore the liars, but this sparks no contagion effect.
5. The *net* effect, therefore, is to push public opinion in the desired direction. With strong contagion, the net effect is large.

One obvious follow-up question is: “Can *anyone* do this?” If this is how the world of ideas really works, why does anyone bother with facts or logic? Or does misinformation require some unmentioned silent partner to succeed?

The most cynical answer is: “Yes, anyone can do this. And anyone who’s anyone does. Look at popular political debate. Facts and logic don’t matter. It’s just a war of competing lies.”

The natural pushback is to say, “You’re exaggerating. Facts and logic matter with some of the people some of the time. People have common sense, after all. If they choose, they can not only reject absurd lies, but heavily discount the words of habitual liars.”

Fair enough. But this response reveals the severe misinformation at the heart of the standard misinformation story.

How so? The story focuses exclusively on the flaws of *speakers*, without acknowledging the flaws of the *listeners*. Misinformation won’t work unless the listeners are themselves naive, dogmatic, emotional, or otherwise intellectually defective. In economic jargon, the problem is that the story mistakes an information problem for a *rationality* problem.

The motivation for this crucial omission is fairly obvious. Blaming listeners for their epistemic vices sounds bad. It makes the accuser sound elitist, if not arrogant. Blaming a few high-status liars for the world’s problems is a lot more compatible with Social Desirability Bias than blaming billions of low-status fools who fail to choose to exercise their common sense.

Once you acknowledge these ugly truths, however, you have to rethink how much

misinformation even matters. Sure, lies can sway fools. But even *unguided* fools can do enormous social harm. If people are irrational enough to fall for “Nazis rule Ukraine” propaganda, maybe they’re irrational enough to independently conclude that “Warmongers rule Ukraine.”

If this seems implausible, remember the vast empirical literature on biased thinking. To take one of my favorite examples, people who have never studied economics are almost invariably protectionists. The reason can’t be “misinformation,” because people who have never studied economics spend near-zero time thinking about the subject. The story almost has to be, rather, that we’re predisposed to error. Protectionism is much more emotionally satisfying for psychologically normal humans. The study of economics is necessary to move away from this default.

Yes, there are plenty of other reasonable complaints about the war on “misinformation.” There’s massive hypocrisy: People who attack “misinformation” often peddle it themselves. There’s thinly-veiled authoritarianism: People should only be free to express approved views. There’s the Kafkaesque pettiness of bots labelling a post “misinformation” for soliciting doubts about a controversial article. The list goes on and on.

Still, the fundamental problem with the war on misinformation is that it scapegoats misinformation for the sins of irrationality. If human being were rational, misinformation would be basically harmless. Thomas Jefferson famously said, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Similarly, I say, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have irrationality without misinformation or rationality with misinformation, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Indeed, in a world of deep human irrationality, misinformation could conceivably improve outcomes by tricking the foolish onto the path of wisdom.