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Conceptualizing Disinformation

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The term disinformation is used extensively today in public discussions and also in a growing academic literature, but it has been subject to relatively little conceptual analysis—although Søe (2018) helpfully reviews some philosophical treatments. More generally, the term’s range of meaning seems widely to be regarded as clear enough in its common uses that to dwell on fine points of definition would be needless, and perhaps counterproductively restrictive. However, this article is to show that anomalies encountered in the term’s use in practice reveal the need for more care in its conceptualization if it is to serve constructively in grasping what is at stake in public discussions.

Certainly, a reasonably determinate field of concern is readily indicated by reference to a cluster of cognate ideas. Not uncommonly, the term ‘disinformation’ is used interchangeably with ‘misinformation’ or ‘propaganda’ and is assumed to refer to ‘false information’. It is generally understood to imply deception or misdirection of some form or to involve some kind of malign intent such as generating confusion. But while this broad family of ideas does capture aspects of a reasonably determinate field of inquiry, closer inspection of the different ideas reveals inconsistencies and even contradictions between their respective meanings.

This article seeks to piece together a conceptualisation of disinformation which is recognizable as such to users of the term in practice but is rigorous and complete enough to account for anomalies that can arise from less fully examined assumptions about its meaning. This will involve a number of distinctions and clarifications that in some cases may not necessarily be familiar to all users of the term.

Disinformation Cannot be Equated with Misinformation

This first point is relatively widely accepted, notwithstanding the fact that the two terms are sometimes treated as equivalents even in research literature. For if they have the meanings that their common usages imply, they can and should be differentiated.

The non-equivalence has several aspects. To begin with, if disinformation is taken to imply intent to deceive, as it generally is, then it cannot simply be equated with misinformation, if this is understood as information that happens to be false or misleading but can be imparted by mistake and without any intention to mislead. As pointed out by the ‘fact check’ organisation [FullFact.org](https://www.fullfact.org/), for instance, misinformation can be identified and corrected using in principle straightforward empirical research methods; but to identify an intent to deceive is a much more difficult and potentially controversial undertaking ([Hill 2020](#)). Intent is regarded on this view as a subjective state that requires very different kinds of methods and skills to ascertain, if it can be reliably discerned at all.

As well as this epistemological difficulty, another issue to note is that in implying an attribution of intent, the identification of disinformation also has an ethical valence: for intent to deceive is normally regarded as ethically reprehensible. Instances of it differ in this respect quite decisively from misinformation that arises from an *innocent* mistake. An innocent mistake involves an epistemic error but not an ethical failing. To refer to disinformation is to imply not only an epistemic claim but also an ethical one.

Staying for the moment with epistemic considerations, it has to be noted that the criteria for identifying instances of disinformation and of misinformation can be disjunctive. That is to say, although disinformation can sometimes involve the deliberate imparting of misinformation, and despite some users of the term defining it in these terms, it need not do so. As professional propagandists have long understood, a particularly effective method of persuading—and of deceiving if need be—is to hew as close as possible to the truth. Sometimes, being strategically ‘economical’ with the truth can create an intended deception without directly affirming any misinformation at all.

The disjuncture, it might also be argued, can be confirmed by reference to the complementary possibility of deliberately communicating falsehood without intending to deceive—at least in any sense that would normally be deprecated or be regarded as a problem for academics or policy makers to occupy themselves with. Obvious illustrations of the point would feature pro-social lying: for example, stories about Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy would not helpfully be described as disinformation campaigns.

It is also possible to suppress truth as part of a strategic communication but without an intention to deceive in a malign way. A good illustration comes from [Martin F. Herz \(1949\)](#), in the earliest academic reference to disinformation I have so far found. Herz, who had honed propaganda techniques as Chief Leaflet Writer for Psychological Warfare at Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) during World War 2, recounts:

Although it was true that prisoners in American P/W camps received eggs for breakfast, further testing [of prisoners’ reception of propaganda] showed us that this notion was so preposterous to the Germans on the other side of the firing line that they simply laughed at the idea. Since this discredited the balance of our message, it became another favorable truth which we learned to suppress (472).

So there seems to be a possibility of deliberately but innocently communicating falsehoods or suppressing truths in a manner that would not seem to fit the more usual characterization of disinformation as something to be deprecated. Thus disinformation cannot necessarily be equated with misinformation and does not even need to involve misinformation.

Meanwhile, the next point to clarify is whether disinformation might be equated with, or even clearly related to, information, as such, at all.

Disinformation is not Information

A proposition aired by the philosopher [Duncan Pritchard \(2021\)](#) is that ‘disinformation doesn’t seem to be a species of information’ (51). He does not expand on this particular thought, but there is a version of it that would disregard the distinction drawn in the previous section and would not categorise misinformation as a kind of information either. This is the thought that only true information is truly information, which is to assume an epistemically normative definition of information as a ‘success term’ (Gelfert 2018, 104). Yet, although this definition has been defended on principle for certain purposes (e.g. Dretske

1983; Floridi 2011), its adoption for present purposes would impose an unhelpful and unnecessary constraint on formulating such simple practical questions as whether a given piece of information conveyed in a report is true or false.

There is, however, a way of expounding the idea of disinformation such that it is not a species of information or of misinformation either. Disinformation can be thought of as not some bad sort of information, but as something ontologically distinct. The term can be understood as indicating a function of, or an effect that arises from, certain kinds of communicative practice—*disinforming*—that in some way subvert the meaning or value of true information, or else exploit misinformation. But if disinforming can be conceptualised as a function of certain kinds of communicative practice, so too can be informing and misinforming, and therefore the question would become that of how to differentiate these practices.

Disinformation as a Function of Strategic Communication

A potentially fruitful way suggested by [Sille Obelitz Søe \(2018\)](#) and [Maria Samkova and Lilia Nefedova \(2019\)](#) deploys the distinction drawn by the philosopher [H.P. Grice \(1975\)](#) between semantic and pragmatic meaning. Semantic meaning is captured in the propositional content of a piece of information whereas pragmatic intent can generate a distinct supervenient meaning that Grice calls *implicature*. The general idea of meaning something not literally stated in the words used when conveying it is very familiar, and Grice distinguishes two distinct sorts of way this can be done.

Conventional implicature can convey an implied premise of a statement whose words are used with their conventional meaning. Grice's example is the statement '*He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave*': the conventional meaning of 'therefore' generates the implicature that all Englishmen are brave. Yet the speaker has not said this in so many words, and therefore has not actually made a claim that can be challenged as misinformation without initiating an inquiry into what the speaker intended to convey. The possibility that the statement could have been uttered 'tongue in cheek', for instance, illustrates a kind of implicature that does not derive simply from the words themselves.

Conversational implicature, as Grice calls it, plays not on the semantic logic of statements but on the normative expectations of communication as it figures in conversation.

Conversation, he points out, has its own immanent norms that people spontaneously acknowledge by participating in it as a general form of practice. These norms answer to what Grice calls the *Cooperative Principle*: it is this that makes a conversation out of what would otherwise be discrete and unrelated speech acts. He summarises these norms in terms of a cluster of maxims that participants in a conversation mutually expect each other to follow. His non-exhaustive list includes maxims under four broad categories: give sufficient but not excessive detail; be truthful; be relevant; be perspicuous.

Now there are of course many ways of failing to fulfil a maxim that do not manifest any particular intent and do not necessarily mislead—including lack of conversational skills,

desultoriness, conflict, uncertainty, impetuosity, or shyness, for instance. More significantly, maxims can also be unfulfilled intentionally—as in the case of speaking ‘tongue in cheek’—but not with intent to deceive. Grice’s illustration of a more purposive intent is the case of a professor who, in writing a student’s testimonial for a philosophy job, affirms that the student has an excellent command of English and has regularly attended tutorials. The absence of any comment on the student’s philosophical ability ‘speaks for itself’ as a recommendation not to hire the student. The professor knows that the counterpart will understand the failure to fulfil all the maxims as a communication in itself. However, implicature is also a versatile means of generating disinformation: in that event, the rules are not simply played with, in a spirit of complicity with the hearer; they are violated with intent to deceive.

A question, therefore, is how a hearer can know, given the myriad ways in which infelicities might enter a conversation, whether a failure to follow the maxims is due to an intent to deceive. The key thought offered by Grice is that ‘[t]he presence of a conversational implicature must be capable of being worked out’ (Grice 1975, 50). If a hearer challenges a speaker’s implicature, then a conversational meta-norm, so to speak, would require the speaker to ‘translate’ the implicature into a semantically conventional form. In that form, the semantic content could be assessed as either information or misinformation.

This general idea of a conversational meta-norm—which makes the Cooperative Principle itself something people generally are ready to follow—is what Jürgen Habermas, for instance, explicates in his theories of communicative action and discourse ethics. His basic idea of communicative action refers to what speakers are doing when they deliberate collaboratively with a view to reaching mutual understanding; communicative action carries an implicit commitment to offer hearers reasons for unclear or surprising claims. By contrast, it is possible to use speech to engage in *strategic* action: in this case, individual speakers aim to achieve their distinct particular objectives rather than reach an agreed understanding or clarification of residual disagreement: hence, if they participate in communication strategically, they may be prepared to violate norms such as Grice’s conversational maxims if necessary. In practice, of course, strategic elements may often figure in conversation without any intent to seriously mislead, and without doing so, but, in principle, the distinction itself is clear enough.

What Habermas calls communicative action is a highly normative concept, invoking a quite idealised notion of communication compared to the more general variety of everyday understandings of that term. So for the sake of clarity, I shall instead use the term *deliberative communication* to refer to communication oriented to reaching an understanding through communicators reasoning together. Deliberative communication, then, contrasts quite decisively with the particular kinds of strategic action that are called *strategic communication*.

The practice of disinforming uses implicature in a *strategic* manner. It depends on others relying upon general observance of the Cooperative Principle while the communicator of disinformation defects from doing so whenever this promotes the strategic objective. Insofar as a disinformant’s aim is to influence people towards some belief or cognitive commitment, this relies on the communicative norms of conversation by means of which other minds are engaged. But insofar as the intent is disinformative, the Cooperative Principle will be violated as necessary.

Conversational implicature is such a pervasive and important aspect of communication that we can regard it as having its own normative status—as a rule-bound practice of playing with the rules of conversation. Disinformation, then, can be conceptualised as not playing the game by the rules due to the misuse of conversational implicature. For this reason, disinformation can in principle be identified by questioning the communicator. Where there is the possibility of challenging communicators to translate their claims into straightforward propositional form, it requires them to explicate their own intent.

On the Limits of Purely Conceptual Analysis

But all this applies within the context of an ordinary conversation between individuals. In that context, it can arise quite straightforwardly that a hearer asks a speaker to clarify a puzzling remark. Disinformation as a problem of public concern, however, arises in a quite different kind of situation. A similar conceptual logic holds, but the practical and contextual differences are important. If accusations of engaging in ‘disinformation’ are rare in ordinary conversation, this is because they would be regarded as confrontational and disproportionate: such an accusation would directly put the conversation on a different footing. It might be hyperbolic in that context to speak of this as a *war* footing, but disinformation such as is highlighted as a matter of public concern is quite characteristically regarded as a strategic element of *information war*.

This points to a need, in the context of disinformation as a public concern, to further develop the conceptual framing in several ways. For one thing, the circumstances of a war involve mutually contending sides: so the model of a speaker being invited to clarify a problematic claim has to be expanded to accommodate typical scenarios where claims and challenges are reciprocal. Furthermore, if the opposition is between organised camps, as it typically will be, then the identification of who is speaking on behalf of them will not always be as clear as in a simple conversation. In all, the potential complexity of organised strategic communications is so considerable that adequately grasping any alleged instance of disinformation is likely to require a great deal of probing investigation.

The claim of the present article is that although the conceptual analysis provided above is not sufficient to grasp fully the nature of the problem of disinformation as a public concern, it is necessary. For without the foregoing clarifications, any discussion of the problem is liable to be hampered by conflicting definitions and assumptions.

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