

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



© THOMAS J FROEHLICH, PH.D.  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS  
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION  
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY  
KENT OH 44240

# Links



- Link to all the links below: <https://tinyurl.com/ydbhfg2h> OR  
<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/links/asist.links.pdf>
- Link to previous work on which most of this presentation is based: Froehlich, Thomas. (2017). A Not-So-Brief Account of Current Information Ethics : The Ethics of Ignorance, Missing Information, Misinformation, Disinformation and Other Forms of Deception or Incompetence. *BiD: textos universitaris de biblioteconomia i documentació*, núm. 39 (desembre). Retrieved September 4, 2018, from: <http://bid.ub.edu/en/39/froehlich.htm>.
- Link to a research paper under current review entitled “The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception in the dissemination of fake news”:  
<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/OWLS/pseudo.cognitive.authority.r3.pdf>  
It is an extension and extrapolation of the first paper.

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- Here is the link to the video lecture:  
[https://video.kent.edu/media/asist.fake.news/1\\_mp980tfc](https://video.kent.edu/media/asist.fake.news/1_mp980tfc) OR  
<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/links/asist.fake.news.mp4>

# Outline



- The Varieties of Ignorance and False Information
  - Lies
  - Ignorance Per Se
  - Misinformation
  - Paltering
  - Disinformation
  - Missing Information
  - Self-Deception or Bad Faith
    - ✦ Motivated
    - ✦ Unmotivated
- Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny
  - Doxing
  - Fake News

# Lies



- In my original Barcelona paper, I did not include lies per se. Who, after all, not recognize that a lie is a falsehood?
- One of Trump's achievements is not only to make the lie a hallmark of his lack of leadership, but to convince his followers that his lies are truth.
- In the days up until the midterms election, the nature and absurdity of his lies became more radical, advocating things that could possibly not done: a tax break for the middle class (Congress would not be in session until after the midterm elections), that there was an imminent invasion on other southern border (notice that after the elections, no mention has been made of the "horde")
- On September 7, 2018, Trump made 125 false or misleading claims within a 2 hour period, an all-time high, bringing his total to over 5000, according to the *Washington Post*. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-false-or-misleading-claims/?utm\\_term=.3b3442ebcdb1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-false-or-misleading-claims/?utm_term=.3b3442ebcdb1))
- What is even more scandalous is at least 30% of the US population believe them or do not care.

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Ignorance Per Se

- Lacking knowledge or awareness, being uninformed about a specific subject or fact.
- Donald Trump's lack of knowledge of the Constitution and how it forms the nature of our democracy, how government works, the balance of powers, the nature of the first amendment (freedom of the press), etc.
- He is ignorant of his ignorance. Like the prisoners in the Cave, he seems incapable of seeing the difference between reality and his "reality."

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Misinformation

- Offering information that is incorrect or inaccurate.
- Don Fallis correctly observes in "The Varieties of Disinformation" (2014, p. 136 – See course bibliography for the sources of all references) that "Inaccurate information (or *misinformation*) can mislead people whether it results from an honest mistake, negligence, unconscious bias, or (as in the case of disinformation) intentional deception." In other words, the difference between misinformation and disinformation is the intent to deceive.
- For example and assuming that I am not a Trump supporter or Hillary Clinton supporter or hater, if I innocently, albeit incorrectly, tell a colleague that Hillary Clinton wanted to abolish gun ownership, I would be misinforming them.

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Paltering

- It is an attempt to mislead by telling the truth, but not the whole truth.
- If your mother asks you whether you have finished your homework and you reply that you were working on your problems in your geometry class, you are paltering by telling the truth but not the whole truth. Is the homework to which you are referring the one due tomorrow? Is that all of the homework that was due? The question was about the whole of one's homework and if there was no full answer, one is paltering.
- It is related to missing information (only partial truth is given) or disinformation (there is an intent to deceive), but it is its own special brand.
- It is a common practice of politicians and executives.

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Paltering

- Presidential-nominee Donald Trump paltered during the presidential debates. He was asked about a housing discrimination lawsuit early on in his career. He stated that his company had given "no admission of guilt," which was true, but did not answer the question. While he may not have admitted it, an investigation by the *New York Times* found that his company did discriminate based on race.
- When President Bill Clinton said "there is not a sexual relationship" between him and former White House intern Monica Lewinski. There had been a sexual relationship but it had ended months before Clinton made that statement. So it was technically true but misleading.

(Rogers et al., 2017)

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Missing information:

- The non-inclusion of information that should be known or present in order to understand facts and make decisions.
- Its absence is due to negligence, incompetence or the desire to mislead.
- For example, accusing Hillary Clinton of being responsible for the Benghazi attack omits the fact that after 11 hours of her testimony before the House Select Committee on Benghazi and many other investigations no substantial evidence was unveiled to indicate that she was the source of any wrongdoing. In short, the preordained conclusion of the Committee was to establish that she was responsible for the event in the absence of any evidence to establish their case. One can conclude nothing from no information or evidence.

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Disinformation

- Supplying misinformation with the deliberate aim to mislead.
- The suppliers of such untruths can include foreign countries, government agencies, corporations, political parties, especially Super PACs, and political candidates.
- The intent to deceive is important because, in general terms, untruths need not be pronounced by someone whose intention is to deceive. But as Don Fallis (2009) notes in *A Conceptual Analysis of Disinformation*, "while disinforming may not require that the source of the misleading information intend to deceive people, it does at least require that the source of the information foresee that people will be deceived."

# Varieties of Ignorance and False Information



## Self-deception or bad faith:

- Sartre observed presciently that bad faith is believing what you don't believe: holding or living a contradiction at the one and same time.
- Sartre's notion is central to his philosophy, a mode of living inauthentically, where people may deceive themselves into thinking that they do not have the freedom to make choices for fear of its potential consequences, i.e., that they would have to be responsible for themselves.
- We might file forms of "willful ignorance" under this category, knowing something to be true but consciously or unconsciously choosing ignorance, e.g., choosing to believe that the Confederate flag is not a symbol of racism.

# Two Forms of Self-deception/Bad Faith: Motivated and Unmotivated

Originally I wanted to promote self-deception as another form of false knowledge, but it is really a way in which we embrace any of the forms of false information, whether misinformation, disinformation, missing information, incomplete information or even true information used in paltering. It is a special but widespread approach of the alt-right and Trump supporters in the Age of Disinformation, that dovetails with a form of a cognitive authority, or at least a false form of it. I distinguish 2 types:

Motivated self-deception:

- Pushing a form of self-deception for conscious political, social, ethical or personal gain (e.g., proposing that all Muslims should be quarantined or deported because all of them believe in Sharia Law and support jihad).
- Stephen Colbert's notion of 'truthiness' is probably the best contemporary expression of motivated self-deception, described by Wikipedia as a "belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts" (*Wikipedia, Truthiness, 2017*).
- We practice truthiness when there is something we want to be true despite clear evidence to the contrary. Types of motivations for motivated self-deception or 'truthiness' include political, personal, social, and ethical.

# Two Forms of Self-deception/Bad Faith: Motivated and Unmotivated



## Unmotivated self-deception:

- Succumbing to one's biases, motivated to the degree that it accords with one's a priori biases; confirmation bias.
- In fact, most people are inclined to information avoidance as a technique of confirmation bias.
- Drawing on research in economics, psychology and sociology, George Loewenstein, Russell Golman and David Haggmann at Carnegie Mellon University “illustrate how people select their own reality by deliberately avoiding information that threatens their happiness and well-being. In a paper published in the *Journal of Economic Literature*, they show that while a simple failure to obtain information is the most clear-cut case of ‘information avoidance,’ people have a wide range of other information-avoidance strategies at their disposal. They also are remarkably adept at selectively directing their attention to information that affirms what they believe or that reflects favorably upon them, and at forgetting information they wish were not true” (Rea, 2017).

# Two Forms of Self-deception/Bad Faith: Motivated and Unmotivated



## Unmotivated self-deception:

- As opposed to the notion of the so-called rational decision maker who seeks to find all information and options for a particular decision, the researchers found that people "often avoid information that could help them to make better decisions if they think the information might be painful to receive. Bad teachers, for example, could benefit from feedback from students, but are much less likely to pore over teaching ratings than skilled teachers" (Lowenstein, quoted by Rea, 2017).
- And furthermore, "even when people cannot outright ignore information, they often have substantial latitude in how to interpret it. Questionable evidence is often treated as credible when it confirms what someone wants to believe" (Rea, 2017).

## Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny: Doxing and Fake News



- There are particularly noxious forms of information calumny, doxing and fake news, that have come into play in the age of misinformation or disinformation, forms that wreaked powerful havoc in the 2016 presidential election and 2018 midterms
- Both were techniques employed by national, right-wing agents and Russian agents to manipulate the results of the election, and they proved particularly effective in swinging the vote of voters who were susceptible to motivated self-deception.

# Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny: Doxing



## Doxing:

- Searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular private or public individual or group on the internet, typically with malicious intent.
- "Doxing" is a neologism that has evolved over its brief history. It comes from a variation in spelling of the abbreviation "docs" (for "documents") and according to Wikipedia refers to "compiling and releasing a dossier of personal information on someone" (*Wikipedia, Doxing, 2017*).
- Essentially, doxing is openly revealing and publicizing records of an individual or group which were previously private or difficult to find, often for nefarious purposes, such as extortion, shaming, coercion or legal, political, or moral harassment.

# Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny: Doxing



## Doxing:

- During the presidential election, Russian hackers targeted Democratic candidates and the Democratic National Committee headquarters by doxing those candidates and the Party.
  - As a candidate, Mrs. Clinton may have already had weaknesses that were compounded by recurrent issues with her private email server and the statements by James Comey, but most Clinton supporters believed that it was the Russian assault that played a fundamental role in her electoral defeat.
  - Its impact was huge, harnessing the monumentally widespread use of hacking and doxing and bringing in Russian state actors to perpetuate and propagate the method.
  - In general, in cases of doxing, there may be some truth in a doxing claim, but it tends to distort the realities by amplifying a portion of a person's or an organization's history or record and so at best is misleading and misinforming.

## Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny: Fake News



### Fake News:

- A form of yellow journalism (news stories with catchy headlines but with little or no factual basis) that consists of deliberate misinformation, disinformation, hoaxes or fraudulent stories, spread in traditional media or online social media.
- It is published with the intent to distort or “mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically” (*Wikipedia, Fake news, 2017*). Those who produce fake news hope to solicit the motivated and unmotivated self-deception of consumers of such ‘information.’

# Two Dominant Forms of Information Calumny: Fake News



## Fake News:

- The U.S. Intelligence Community has said that it has concluded that Russia sought to influence the election of Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Carroll, 2016).
  - Dubbed "Pizzagate," one of the most serious examples of the consequences of publishing fake news came with posts to social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook that falsely claimed that the Washington D.C. pizza store Comet was the center of a child-sex ring run by Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta. Edgar Welch, 28, of Salisbury, North Carolina, the young man who fired at least three shots from an AR-15 rifle inside the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in December, 2016, explained his attack by saying that he was investigating the veracity of the conspiracy theory this news story had generated.
  - Fortunately, no one was hurt (Simpson, 2017). One might argue that fake news is a species of truthiness or a form of bad faith in that one makes the assumption that the source of the story on the web, usually found on social media, is real. Returning to the example of the presidential campaign, it is clear that Russian troll farms and other Russian agencies used Instagram, bought ads on Facebook and produced millions of tweets to favor the election of Donald Trump (Kosoff, 2017).

# Fake News and Bots



- A particularly pernicious form of fake news employs "bots."
- A 'bot' is a software application that automates tasks such as repetitive responding to related tweets on the topic that is being slandered.
- Russian agents have been especially effective in the use of bots to produce disinformation in stories on Twitter, which is currently one of the most influential forms of social media. They create bogus Twitter accounts by using common key words and hashtags that would typically accompany a pro-Trump or anti-democracy tweet.

# Fake News and Bots



- A site called 'Hamilton 68' (<http://dashboard.securingdemocracy.org/>) monitors Twitter traffic to trace the origin of these kinds of fake news stories to some 600 Russian accounts.
  - This site was named after Alexander Hamilton's *Federalist Paper 68*, in which he anonymously defended the U.S. Constitution to the public, and its function is to alert Twitter and other social media users to the ongoing attempt of the Russians to destabilize Western governments and influence elections.
  - In September, 2017, the Russians were pushing stories to have the Trump administration fire General H. R. McMaster, one of the voices in that administration that believes in NATO and the stability of the European Union (Hamilton 68 Website, 2017).

# Fake News and Bots



- Producing fake news stories can be financially rewarding, and not just for Russians.
  - NBC News reported the case of a Macedonian teenager who was one of the many Macedonians producing fake news stories, writing under the pseudonym Dimitri. Dimitri wrote and distributed articles criticizing Hillary Clinton and praising Donald Trump which looked real and appeared to be properly documented, but were not.
  - His reward for these efforts, based on the penny-per-click advertising scheme, was \$60,000 over six months, garnered from clicks from Trump supporters (Smith; Banic, 2017). Such enticements not only increase the flood of fake news stories but also make it much more difficult for people to be discerning, particularly for those predisposed to accept these stories uncritically.

# Fake News and Bots



- What is particularly troublesome is that it is that such techniques continue to be used by the Russians and others to influence national and local elections and the techniques for stopping them are difficult, if not impossible, because it is difficult to control their source (Russia or other international agents) through the internet.
- Those motivated to embrace fake news deem any attack on fake news as fake news itself, perpetuated by the liberal media, a perfect catch-22 lesson of bad faith that Trump has also perpetuated: making claims based on lies whose credibility is supposedly enhanced by attacking those who claim that such stories are fake news.

# Other Dimensions of Barcelona Paper



- Goals of Deception (Fallis)
- Psychological Considerations for the Success for Fake News (Pettigrew)
- Cognitive Authorities for Real News and Fake News
- Role of Information Professionals
- Plato Remembered

# Current Research



In my upcoming research, I try to show

- what motivations drive the creation and dissemination of fake news stories and
- how fake news stories are perpetuated through collective self-deception (among other forms of self-deception)
- how pseudo cognitive authorities try to legitimize fake news stories (as a variety of second-hand “knowledge,”) )
- which are perpetuated through multiple sources and venues (fundamentalist religious organizations, Fox News, alt-right social media sites, Sinclair broadcasting, alt-right podcasts, etc.).
- how the ostensible “validity” of such stories increases through its rapid dissemination in the internet and
- through such enhancers/accelerators as repetition, the Kruger Dunning effect, and agnotology (culturally induced ignorance)
- In the end a self-reinforcing bubble of fakes news, authorities and support is created that maintains propaganda as a form of truth and decries real news sources as fake news.

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