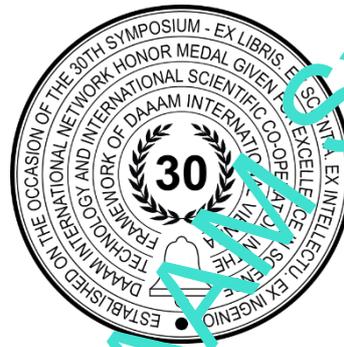


RELIABLE INFORMATION SOURCES IN THE AGE OF PROPAGANDA

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This Publication has to be referred as: Tomsu, M[iroslav](2022). Reliable Information Sources in the Age of Propaganda, Proceedings of the 33rd DAAAM International Symposium, pp.xxxx-xxxx, M. Tomsu, Published by DAAAM International, ISBN 978-3-902734-xx-x, ISSN 1726-0679, Vienna, Austria
DOI: 10.2507/33rd.daaam.proceedings.xxx

Abstract

One of the characteristics of the information society is the dramatic, difficult-to-manage increase in information. Nevertheless, there are negative aspects to the publication and information explosion. An increasing number of information and information sources do not guarantee the multiplication of knowledge to date. Not only do they often fail to benefit him, they sometimes harm him.

One faces the problem of protecting oneself from misleading knowledge and the pernicious influence of ethically objectionable information. We often fail to navigate the amount of information and, in the absence of time, reliably distinguish information relevant from irrelevant, verified from unverified, and authentic from false. A particularly adolescent individual is not, without prior warning, often prepared to assume that publicly controlled media could provide false information.

The article will try at least briefly to highlight tools, methods, or at least intuitive mechanisms that help to qualify the quality of information sources and make it more likely to achieve a higher level of reliability in their selection.

Keywords: Propaganda; information sources; information; information society.

1. Introduction

Spreading fake news is a significant problem because it poses epistemic and practical risks - influencing crucial decisions about one's life (e.g., health, finance, education, or governance), relying on inaccurate beliefs can lead to various harms (e.g., illness, bankruptcy, ignorance, or mismanagement). In response to this phenomenon, scientists have rightly highlighted the role of research in understanding fake news and developing literacy practices that contribute to educating information users. For example, Cooke (2017) argues that research into information behaviour on phenomena such as information retrieval, information selection, information avoidance, and the use of information can help to understand how to differentiate information properly.

According to the European NGO Media Literacy for Citizenship, which is dedicated to increasing media literacy, when talking about fake news, we may come across one or more of ten types of misleading news that differ in their motivation and impact: propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content, satire and fraud, errors, partisans, conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, misinformation and false information (Steinberg, 2017). Three of these types of fake news (namely propaganda, guerrillas, and reports on conspiracy theories) form a unique grouping (which, for convenience, I call "propaganda"); they display an affective dimension and involve power relationships in a way that other types of fake news do not. Scientists across disciplines paid particular attention to propaganda fake news and the best practices available for epistemic self-defence.

For example, philosophers were interested in the recent emergence of a post-truth climate in our societies, where "faith may no longer be guided by reality" (Bermúdez, 2018) or "strong opinion is considered more valuable than facts" (Legg, 2018) and is often more or less explicitly discussed in the context of propaganda (e.g., Bermúdez, 2018; Fairfield, 2018; Gelfert, 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Stanley, 2015). These authors draw their intellectual resources and suggestions from traditional philosophical, epistemological frameworks (such as David Hume's empirical philosophy or Charles S. Peirce's semiotic theory) to develop and recommend epistemic strategies that individuals can use to cope with the spread of fake news (e.g., Fallis, 2004; Legg, 2018).

In this context, the article is seen as contributing to integrating these multidisciplinary perspectives on fake news and developing tools for individuals seeking to research them and defend their appeal, as well as examining the extent to which cases of fake news fit into these dimensions.

Finally, the article presents several aspects that may serve as a basis for understanding the propaganda uses of fake news, building scientific literacy practices, and helping people acquire epistemic self-defence skills.

2. Propaganda theory

The term propaganda originally had a neutral meaning, defined as spreading an idea to influence public opinion. Over time, however, propaganda begins to be mainly viewed negatively and is associated, or confused, with various negative concepts. "Words often used as synonyms for propaganda are falsehood, distortion, deception, manipulation, brainwashing, and empty speech" [1]. I view the term negatively, mainly in liberal democracies, based on the use of propaganda by past regimes (e.g., fascism and Nazism) of the 20th century as a political tool. It is currently also viewed negatively because it is a hybrid warfare tool. Negatively, propaganda is not only perceived in the Czech language but also in English, Russian or German, for example. However, understanding of the term varies across cultures and languages. For example, propaganda is used as a synonym for advertising in Spanish and Portuguese, and an opposing point of view is absent [2].

The Catholic Church only mentioned the term in the 17th century at the Vatican. Many Protestants were speaking out against the church at the time, and their numbers continued to rise. In parallel, territories were discovered on the American and Asian continents, where the aim was to turn the population to faith by using the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith created by Pope Gregory XV. The word did not lose its neutrality of meaning until the 1890s when an English author dubbed the leaders of the French Revolution as propaganda disciples. Since then, propaganda has come to be considered, among other things, in a negative sense. This is demonstrated by an 1842 dictionary that presents propaganda as the activity of secret societies seeking to disseminate their opinions and ideas and is a dreaded activity for most governments. He is then mentioned in favorable terms a few years later by the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, yet the word was not commonly used, as confirmed by the fact that its definition was not included in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which was published in 1911 [3].

Propaganda was not commonly used until the beginning of The First World War. The term has started to appear new in campaigns or printed form, for example, through posters and literature. The purpose was to use a false message to maintain the morale of his country's population and, in turn, to weaken the enemy. Based on this, propaganda has changed its meaning from trying to spread specific ideas to a means of gaining power. Even after the war ended, the propaganda continued to be viewed negatively and associated with acts of war [4]. During World War II, propaganda could be used on an even larger scale, thanks mainly to technological advances. Outside of posters and newspapers, the government began to use new communication channels, which were nothing more than movies and radio. The purpose of the communication was, as with the First World War, to strengthen the country's unity and weaken the enemy [3]. During the Cold War, propaganda became an instrument of ideological warfare. Both powers sought to define themselves against the enemy by making false claims, which propaganda helped them immensely. The aim was to cause fear in society [5]. In previous years, compared to now, propaganda was more recognizable. In the age of modern technology, it has become a mass tool used by the media and social network users. Propaganda thus becomes a professional device that can be very and intrusive, even unrecognizable [3].

2.1. Definition of the term propaganda

Although the word propaganda has been around in its political sense since the 19th century, it is still relatively difficult to define, and its definitions differ among different authors. According to Paul Baines, propaganda is "in popular language an insidious ideological communicative force that attacks people's minds and is attributed to it more power than it has." [6] The definition is misleading, mainly due to the term "insidious." Sheryl Tuttle Ross provides a more general definition: "Any attempt to persuade anyone with any opinion." [7] While this definition is closer to the word's original meaning or persuasion, it is too general and could include the persuasion of children or other activities.

For comparison with the aforementioned general definitions, we look at an overview of definitions from other authors included, among others, in propaganda Vol. I. and also in dictionaries Oxford Dictionary and Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Oxford Dictionary provides a slightly different definition: "Information, predominantly of a distorted or misleading nature, used to promote political interests or opinions." [8] A certain preconception of the term resurfaces when propaganda is referred to as "misleading" or "distorted." However, propaganda is not necessarily misleading or deceptive.

In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word propaganda is described as follows: "Ideas or statements which are often false or exaggerated and disseminated to help the dispute, political leadership, government, etc.". [9] Other meanings refer to the Congregation mentioned above for the Promotion of Faith, The Dissemination of Information or Opinions to help or Harm an Institution or Individual, as well as accusations disseminated in order to harm the other party [9]. It can be observed that the dictionary points to a more negative side of propaganda, especially in its political sense, above all to damage the other side.

Orbaugh offers a simplified definition of Stanley Cunningham in his publication Propaganda Performed. Cunningham's propaganda is predominantly used by the mass media, exploiting confusion and trying to develop the overall confusion of viewers, creating a system of opinion and presenting itself in the form of information and knowledge, discouraging rationality and encouraging the uptake of unverified information [10].

Looking at the above definitions, it appears that common elements include that this is a deliberate action to influence the mindset, persuade or manipulate the impressions of a specific group of people, thereby enriching the promoter or fulfilling his interest. Although this simplifies, it might be sufficient to understand the basic principle of propaganda.

2.2. Dividing propaganda

There are several divisions of propaganda. It can be divided into denigrating and celebratory. Ftorek divides propaganda into political, economic, didactic, varietal, and ideological. Political propaganda has a field of action in the political sphere. Ftorek describes it as an effort to "gain and maintain political power." [2]

Propaganda is divided by source and origin of information into white, grey, and black. This signals a progressively lower degree of transparency and identification [11].

- **White propaganda** contains the relatively correct information. The source of information is identified. It could be very close to the truth. It seeks to build trust in the final acceptors of information, as it can pay off in the future, and at some point, the built-up trust can bring benefits to the propagandist [12].
- **Black propaganda** uses misinformation and lies that seem plausible. It does not name the source or attribute the authorship to someone else. "Black propaganda is a big lie," including all types of creative deception [12]. It is used, for example, by an anti-government organization.
- **Grey propaganda** stands between white and black propaganda. The source may or may not be stated. The origin and veracity of the information are also unclear. Inaccurate content is supposed to be used for disinformation. Sitting propaganda is prevalent in many spheres of society. Jowett and O'Donnell cite a few examples of where grey propaganda is most prevalent. These are "companies that break the statistics on annual reports, advertisements that suggest a product can achieve results it cannot achieve, films made solely for product placement, and television evangelists who personally store the money they require for religious purposes." [13]

2.3. Propaganda techniques and tools

The techniques and tools of propaganda are intended to increase and enhance the effect of propaganda and its effect on society. For propaganda to be successful, the audience must accept it. Adoption is aided by special techniques to maximize the effect of propaganda.

The Propaganda Analysis Institute (IPA) has named and described essential propaganda tools. The IPA was established in 1937. It was created to educate the American public about the spread of propaganda. The IPA identified seven propaganda tools (name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, bandwagon) (IPA, 1938).

[12] they work with the notion that propaganda, based on persuasion by the audience, promises to help people and meet their needs. A propagandist who responds to the needs of the people he intends to control and tries to meet their needs are always met with a favourable reception. Propagandists target beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours and social norms. Jowett and O'Donnell thought targets should evaluate propaganda. [12] described propaganda techniques that differ from the seven techniques described by the IPA Institute.

Donald A. Barclay cites another approach to manipulative propaganda techniques to increase the impact of manipulative messages. Calling the techniques that weaken our information guard [14]. The Information Guard describes it as a decision-making process through which we assess the messages that reach us. When the consumer reads the message, the information guard will evaluate it as either trustworthy or untrustworthy. It also describes techniques that weaken the ability to decode propaganda. Some of the techniques described by Barclay are similar to those described by the Propaganda Analysis Institute [12].

2.4. Misinformation

The emergence and dissemination of disinformation are also linked to the issue of propaganda. First, it is crucial to define what misinformation even means. Misinformation is "false, misleading, false information which aims to influence the judgment and opinion of an individual, multiple persons or the whole community. Significantly, it coincides with fake news as well as some hoaxes or conspiracies" [15]

Fake news is no different from disinformation. It is merely a new name for known disinformation. Contrary to misinformation, hoaxes are spread by chain using social networks or email, often alarms that aim to get messages to as many recipients as possible. Content can vary from amusing to a warning. The main thing is to get as much sharing as possible. Misinformation also differs from hoaxes in that it is created to influence people's opinions, and the purveyors are not just ordinary people but, for example, the governments of the countries in question. As I mentioned in the introduction, disinformation has become part of our daily lives, which we are constantly in contact with thanks to the media. The growth of misinformation was helped by the internet and, subsequently, by social networks. The purveyors of misinformation do not seek to inform the reader objectively and truthfully but mainly to engage [3]. Misinformation differs from disinformation in that it is not disseminated intentionally. It is, therefore, a piece of information that is wrong, false, or unbiased, but the purpose of the purveyor was not to deceive the recipient, as is precisely the case with disinformation. It gets among people by mistake, based on poorly verified data [16].

For the most part, the modern way of disinformation campaigning begins with reporting on a particular scandal spread through the not-so-well-known media. If misinformation is successful, it will become more widely distributed among readers, and more well-known media will take over [17]. An individual's attention is gained by misinformation mainly based on emotions that harassers enjoy. Messages that engage readers based on emotion have a better chance of success and subsequent remembrance. Given that misinformation may not be accepted or believed by the reader, it is highly likely to be remembered anyway. If the reader encounters misinformation, it becomes more important to him, creating a danger of spreading it [3].

2.5. Summary

As is clear from the above, the meaning of the term propaganda is not entirely easily defined. We conclude that the definitions of the term are not uniform and differ among different authors. The basic principles of propaganda were summarized to give readers an idea of the concept. The primary propaganda model can be described as a deliberate action to influence the mind set, persuade, or manipulate the impressions of a particular group of people, thereby enriching the promoter or fulfilling his interest.

3. Trustworthy sources and trust in the media

The media is an important platform where journalists and professionals meet the general public. It seeks to inform and educate but also influence and manipulate them. Audience perceptions and attitudes determine the success or failure of media exposure. Trust and credibility are essential points. Credibility is central to trust [18], so it is one of the fundamental dimensions of trust. The media's credibility is a crucial prerequisite for the work of journalists and the legitimacy of the communications they present to the public in the form of media outlets. Concept of media credentials is a complex and multi-dimensional construct [19]. Media credibility research focuses on either the credibility of sources, such as a press

officer, organization, or a specific journalist and the credibility of the medium through which the message is sent to the audience [20].

The resource's credibility is based on its integrity, referring to the resource's expertise and competence, ability to make correct claims and logical information based on knowledge, expertise, and professionalism, and the communicator's ability to speak truthfully and be reliable. Trust and confidence are linked and fundamental variables in the relationship between the media and the public [21].

Tsfati defines trust as a relationship over time between two parties: a trusting party⁸ and an innocent party, an innocent party. In a context, a confidant can be a medium (or a particular journalist), and a confidant is a student who consumes the medium. Trust in the media, according to Tsfati, should be essential for interacting with people and exposing themselves to the media [23]. The term "distrust of the media" then works with the feeling that "the mainstream media is not credible or reliable, that the news media is getting in the way of society rather than helping it" [22]. Tsfati also speaks of the concept of "media skepticism." It also explains to him the belief that journalists are not objective, that they do not always tell the whole story, and that they sacrifice accuracy and precision for personal gain [22]. In the context of trust, it also works with selective exposure, i.e., the assumption that audiences prefer media content that matches their beliefs, values, and opinions. According to Tsfati and Cappella (2003), people skeptical of the mainstream media will read less regular news. They expect these media skeptics to seek alternative news sources compared to their trusted counterparts [18].

3.1. Consumption of media content

Given the wide range of media, it is safe to assume that no one will read daily news on all media platforms. Each user consumes the media at different intensities and according to different habits. What matters is routinization, which is "deeply embedded in the structured practices of everyday life" [24]. Studies have found that users combine media differently [24]. The spectrum of media consumed and the time spent reading news can influence the ability to identify propaganda. Time is a contextual factor. It seems logical to predict that less time spent making decisions will lead to lower-quality decisions [24].

3.2. Media literacy

The term "media literacy" covers several types. We can even relate it to advertising, tv shows, etc. In addition to media literacy, literacy is also informational and digital.

Media literacy can be understood as a set of knowledge and competencies to understand media content properly, be it print, television, radio, or internet media, and to create their messages. It is also about the ability to search for relevant media and information. Media education can be understood as the development of knowledge associated with media literacy, spreading awareness of media exposure, and verifying information. Definitions of media literacy vary across literature, and attitudes toward it tend to be ambivalent. William G. Christ and W. James Potter's essay *Media Literacy, Media Education, and the Academy* (1998) ask whether media literacy is a skill, an accumulation of knowledge, or a specific view of the world [25].

The assessment of the credibility of the reports is linked to the motivation and knowledge of the trustees. As Radic puts it, "the perception of trustworthiness is influenced by experience, knowledge and skills" [21]. It is, therefore, appropriate to examine the evaluation of propaganda texts, including in the context of knowledge of the Czech media landscape.

Research by The National Association for Media Literacy Education's Maksla, Ashley, and Craft (2015) sets out a new approach to measuring media literacy. Developing the Hobbs and Frost measurement tool, they ask questions about respondents' knowledge of the media landscape in U S A. They also inquire about current affairs in the country. They build on research into media skepticism and trust [18].

4. Credibility, relevance, reliability of information and information resources

4.1. Link to source of knowledge

If a scientific article lacks references to sources, the reader may consider the text a consideration, a featurette, or an otherwise popularizing article, or worse, an attempt to feed into the results of the actual researcher's work.

A reader who wants to get to the bottom of the matter should never rely on a single source of information but verify that a link (if one exists) is quoted accurately or that the author of the article has edited it to his advantage. A purposeful reader should strive to find a network of references to a particular prime source (such as Einstein's theory of relativity)

from which the other theories derive and to arrive at its current implications from that source. Thanks to the hyperlink network, the Internet fully supports this option [26].

4.2. Resource Reliability Guarantee

The author's name and the institution he represents are essential indications of the document. The author's credibility can be verified by consulting an encyclopedia, a Dictionary like Who is Who, or by asking a professional authority. A scientific sector - Scientology - that uses exacting methods to identify factors that might automatically (for intellectually otherwise unmanageable amounts of information) distinguish quality information from poor quality information. Scintigraphy (a.k.a. infantry, naucommetry, etc.) represents a method of determining the quality of scientific work, which relies on the simple, intuitive assumption that the more the scientific community notices and cites a particular publication, the greater the value of the publication. The "value" of a document is the sum of the document values that refer to that document divided by the number of references that lead from the document. In order to obtain a high rating, a large number of references from low-level documents to a given document or even a smaller number from important documents is sufficient. The reliability of the information source can be inferred from the quotient formed by the so-called impact factor (IF) of the journal in which the information is published. The IF value indicates how many times an article in a particular journal has been quoted in the first two years. A scientist's effort should be to publish in the highest quality journals with the maximum IF [26].

4.3. Architecture structure arrangement of ideas and arguments in the article

This can signal the appearance of apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in statements and allegations. The initial clue is the reader's intuition, which, through his experience and his acquired knowledge, can warn him of obviously unreliable information. The school supplies students with reliable and guaranteed knowledge fixed in encyclopedias and textbooks. However, in his private life, in contact with peers, adults, and the media, the student acquires experience that is often at odds with the lessons learned. However, even incoherent knowledge can become a base upon which a student can lean. Contradictions with the facts of the text and knowledge gained in natural science, natural history, physics, etc., are, despite their incompleteness, the first clues in distinguishing credible and implausible information [26].

4.4. Rule on economics of thought (Occam's razor)

Without this criterion, there would be no reliable and decisive way to choose between the different hypotheses. Occam's razor believes that if there are two or more explanations for a phenomenon, the simplest should be chosen.

Often, ineffectual dissection and obfuscation are a symptom of theoretically low-benefit work. The rule recommends addressing what is essential, forcing authors to refer to substantiating facts and use substantiated arguments [26].

5. Rules for verifying information

In the past, responsibility for the veracity of the information and its verification was placed on the publisher of a particular medium, which had to be assessed by the ethical codes of reporting and audience. In principle, what is written is true. This is given (in the original context, it applied to contracts). Most of the population was primarily the recipients of the information, not its creators. Producing the information also required finance (capital), without which expanding the content en masse was impossible.

With the advent of the information society and the opening-up of the world of the internet and social networks, all barriers have fallen away - producing content can be produced by anyone at any time, without the need for funding and without the requirement to verify the information. Only some information is taken from verified sources - press agencies and offices. The reader is currently also the creator/producer of content (blogs, Youtube channels, alternative sites), which makes him more demanding - he must be able to judge which information is accurate and which is false.

5.1. Common sense

Very often, concerning misinformation, we are faced with the view that, quite simply, common sense will help us assess the veracity of information. However, this cannot rely upon 100% of the information disseminated online.

5.2. Authorship

We verify whether the author is an expert in the given field, e.g., according to its performance as a university faculty or according to the library authors database, as well as whether the documents have undergone peer review assessment by other experts.

5.3. *Publisher's reputation*

We assess whether the publisher is listed, whether it is an educational organization or a professional company, which is one of the guarantees of trustworthiness.

5.4. *Breadth and depth of coverage of the issue*

The information should not only be objective but should also include all contexts and contexts. The information provided should be of a high standard.

5.5. *Topicality*

We are looking at whether the creation date is given. We note whether links can be found to the sources, whether there are also expert sources in the links, and whether the bequeathed information is still valid.

5.6. *Objectivity of information*

The description tries to be as close as possible to its subject and thus limit the influence of the recognizing person as much as possible. It is desirable precisely because it does not depend on person and is therefore valid, applicable, and acceptable to everyone. Minimal switching and trying to influence the reader.

5.7. *Verifiability of sources*

We check that the originator of the information indicates the sources from which it is drawn and that direct citations are given when the information is received.

6. **Conclusion**

Propaganda in various forms has been part of war conflicts for centuries. Today, in the age of the internet and the multitude of unverified information, the issue of propaganda is becoming ever more topical. One of the features of the internet makes it very easy for a single person to send the same message to hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people, making the internet almost instantly a compelling and potentially dangerous means of spreading propaganda. Nevertheless, new media theorists often neglect the propaganda work carried out through mass media or in connection with PR and advertising.

With the development of the information society and the growing popularity of the internet, we must admit that our lives depend on the daily flow of information. Probably this fact is not usually widely perceived by people, but essential information can be of priceless value. Information obtained in a web environment can save a life, prevent material damage, and ease a lifestyle. For companies, making the right decision means money or other benefits. They say that a message becomes valuable if it quickly comes at the right time and its content matches reality.

Uncovering unserious approaches to the truth of a fact does not always have as conclusive a means as those mentioned in this article. The mimicry used by some authors manages to hide actual knowledge so successfully that even a severe scientist can be deceived.

I want to go from the unequivocal and easily conclusive documents we have presented to cases in which scientific truths are drowned out by the commercial interests of individuals (or entire corporations) who, in their interest, are even willing to turn the results of science against themselves. Defending against these approaches requires more patience and radical approaches on the part of science advocates.

7. **Acknowledgments**

This article was supported by grant project IGA/FAI/2021/003 "Supporting the exercise of the Integrated Rescue System and other population protection authorities" - resolved in 2022.

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