

Authoritative Disinformation: the Benefits and Limits of Information, Media and Digital Literacies



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

Overview



- 15 minutes is hardly enough to summarize the research on disinformation that I have been undertaking for the last four years that has led to this presentation.
- For this presentation, I will highlight some major points and conclude with a model of communication that addresses campaigns for information or disinformation, though the focus is on disinformation. For a background that will fill in this work, you can visit a longer presentation at my website as well as a recently published book chapter, *10 Lessons for the Age of Disinformation*, a link to which is found at my website: <http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/> . I am in the process of turning the research into a book.
- My initial and continuing research has been to try to understand how a significant population of the United States can not only endorse, but also promote a president and administration that oppose, for the most part, their real interests and welfare.
- With the growth of the internet, the interests and antagonisms of this subpopulation are stoked into an agenda hostile to the survival of American democracy.
- Facts, evidence, logic and the consensus of experts are dismissed as fake news.
- My current research has been interested in authoritative disinformation: how disinformation is created, authorized and disseminated and how disinformation succeeds in light of or despite the content of the message
- In particular, my focus has been on the role of how cognitive authorities, especially pseudo-cognitive authorities like Fox News, facilitate the success of disinformation campaigns, contrasting how they work in the proper transfer of information.
- In the process I have incorporated studies from psychology, philosophy, communication studies, information studies, journalism, etc.

Overview



- I am interested the role and benefits of information literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy, but equally their limitations.
- My conclusion is that that these literacies are beneficial for those who are educable or open to learning.
- But they are not particularly useful for those who exist in a propaganda feedback loop or who live in filter bubbles – their sources of information are restricted to a few communication channels and other channels are ignored or regarded as “fake news.” Their interactions are restricted to like-minded leaders, friends, or associates. Psychological considerations are invoked to try to understand this behavior.
- The presentation concludes a work in progress: a complex model of communication that tries to understand how disinformation campaigns work and even when the actual content of the message (e.g., the internal use of bleach or disinfectant will cure the coronavirus) can be ignored, dismissed, contradicted or rationalized.

Cognitive Authorities



- What is a cognitive authority?
- When one lacks experience, education, or knowledge, or does not have the time or inclination to acquire such, a cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as second-hand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. One can be mistaken about whether the authority is sound or not.
- As we grow up, we cannot experience everything and so some of what we know is taken from individuals (e.g. father, mother, friends, leader), groups (e.g., classmates), or institutions (e.g., schools, books).
- For this paper, the focus is on news sources including social media, political leaders, political parties, and religious leaders).

Patrick Wilson and Cognitive Authority

- Patrick Wilson wrote a work called *Second-hand knowledge - an inquiry into cognitive authority* in 1983 which promoted a variety of notions.
- He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways:
 - (1) We can construct first-hand knowledge based on our experience. Unfortunately, our experience is limited.
 - (2) We can construct knowledge from or through others, second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others
- Second-hand knowledge comes in various degrees – some people know what they are talking about, and others (at the other end) can be self-inflated liars
- Cognitive authority is a phrase that Wilson coined to explain our understanding of others that recognize them as being proper authorities.
- My use of cognitive authority expands Patrick Wilson's original description.

Cognitive Authorities

6

- Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.
- Cognitive authority exists on a continuum, exists in relation to a sphere of interest, and involves at least two people.
- Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.
- Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., Fox News or MSNBC.
- For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty. This observation is true for both authentic and pseudo cognitive authorities.
- News media can produce assertions as “second-hand knowledge” which in reality may be “true beliefs,” “false beliefs,” or “preferential beliefs.” They exist as beliefs in the minds of the consumers until they are verified or not, or whether or when there are grounds for not needing to pursue their verification.

Cognitive Authorities



- A lot of information or disinformation is created, authorized, and transmitted by cognitive authorities, such as The New York Times, the Washington Post and Fox News
- Fox News is a false cognitive authority for it lacks journalistic integrity and has a falsification rate of over 59%, which means that its news is primarily disinformation, misinformation, lack of information, paltering or fake news.
 - Politifact, for a time period that is not specified, estimates that of the statements “made on air by Fox, Fox News and Fox Business personalities and their pundit guests”: 10% are true, 12% mostly true, 19% half-true, 21% mostly false, 29% false and 9% pants-on-fire false. (Fox’s File, 2018). Thus a majority of statements, 59%, are less than half-true. It has gotten worse throughout Trump’s time in office.
- Despite that, it is the major news source for most Republicans and conservatives, as we shall detail shortly
- The point is that in the current information ecology who said it (the authority) is as important (even more important) as what was said (the information content).

Cognitive Authority: Degree of Influence



- I try establish the notion of cognitive authority to the trust that viewers invest in that authority - this investment suggests the degree of influence that a media source has, not that what it conveys is reliably true.
- One of the difficulties in my research is being able to distinguish a relatively false cognitive authority from a genuine one.
- The problem is that while can make such a distinction, it is not often binary, but a matter of degree. Sites like <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/> try to sort out various media, their political orientation and the degree of reliability of each source based on the nature of their sources.

The case of Fox News



- Facttank, a service of the Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/five-facts-about-fox-news/>) in a March 19-24, 2020 survey, makes the following claims about Fox News:
 1. Around 4-in-10 Americans trust Fox News and almost the same number distrust Fox News
 1. Republicans place trust in one source, Fox News far more than any other and rely on Fox News far more for political news
 2. Republicans trust Fox News more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.
 3. On an ideological scale, the average Fox News consumer is to the right of the average U.S. adult but not as far right as other outlets (Breitbart, Hannity (radio) and Limbaugh (radio))
 4. People who cite Fox News as the main source of political news are older and more likely to be white.
 5. Those who name Fox News as their main source of political news stand out in their views on key issues, including Trump. E.g., in the survey mentioned above 63% of them believe that Trump was doing an excellent job on the coronavirus pandemic.

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge



- One of the questions that is of interest is the cognitive state of the creators or transmitters of information on news media and what is the cognitive state of the receivers of such information.
- Is it knowledge, opinion (true belief, false belief, and beliefs that are neither true or false)? How do they differ among senders and receivers?

Knowledge, Opinion and Second-Hand Knowledge

- While contrary to conventional notions about opinion, I expand on the notion of opinion by arguing that opinions come in three general types: (1) true beliefs; (2) beliefs that are preferences, being neither true or false; and (3) false beliefs.
- “True belief” is a belief that could be turned into knowledge (or which can be justified) through experience, education or research, such as seeking evidence from reliable sources. If one did not know that the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the square root of the sum of its sides squared, one could take a course in geometry to learn it. If one believes that Pizzagate is a fake news story, one can do the research using reliable sources for confirming that assessment.
- If I think that Adele is a better singer than Lady Gaga, that may be true for one person and not another. Matters of taste, for which one can make arguments, are never true per se. They are matters of opinion (or preferential beliefs) that will vary among individuals or groups, even though one can advance arguments for why one would prefer one over the other.
- There are “false beliefs,” e.g., climate change denial, which cannot be converted into truth. Some false beliefs are attempted to make true, through false evidence, reasoning, or expertise.

Knowledge, Opinion and Second-Hand Knowledge

- During the current coronavirus pandemic, Trump has made claims for his managing the pandemic in the best possible way, that he had anticipated the pandemic (claiming that WHO), by his claiming that there were enough tests and ventilators, etc. available to deal with the disease/
- All of these claims are verifiably false (by citing scientific evidence, or showing audiovisual recordings about his claims), but that does not seem to deter Fox viewers either to endorse his leadership (as shown above) or to ignore, dismiss or rationalize (e.g., he really did not mean what he said) some of his claims (e.g., to internally use bleach or disinfectant to cure the coronavirus).
- A somewhat confusing scenario needs to be sorted out: consumers receive information that pretends to be knowledge and that may be claimed to be knowledge by the consumer, based on their belief in a cognitive authority (such as a political leader, religious leader or news organization) and yet which is at best in the consumer's mind second-hand knowledge that may be in actuality opinion and even false belief.
- Various psychological factors predispose or motivate both creators/senders of disinformation as well as receivers and we need to look at these.

A Sample of Psychological Factors

- Willful or deliberate ignorance: the conscious choice not to know.
- Information avoidance is not the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception.
- Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).
- Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).
- Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual’s beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p. 2).
- The psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality” (p. 5).
- For more detail on psychological issues and other psychological factors, see my recent publication on “Ten Lessons for the Age of Disinformation” at my website: <http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/>

Psychological Factors: Deception and Self-Deception

- Self-deception is a way in which we can maintain our beliefs while ignoring or avoiding contravening evidence. Von Hippel and Robert Trivers describe five varieties of self-deception: (a) biased information search; (b) biased interpretation; (c) misremembering; (d) rationalization; and (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true.
- Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs as we convince others, and vice versa. This reciprocity is social self-deception.
- There are two cases each of social self-deception each of which has two aspects, positive and negative: (a) situating (i) positive – by seeking like-minded people and (ii) negative – by avoiding people with whom we disagree; and (b) persuasive (i) positive -- by trying to convince people to become like-minded or (ii) negative – by withholding information that would deter a person from becoming like-minded.
- Collective self-deception elevates social self-deception into group behavior.

Accelerators or Enhancers for Accepting Disinformation

There are enhancers or accelerators that make such news, particularly fake news, more plausible:

- Repeating information, true or not, increases its believability and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). It also applies to cable news and their pundits, their consumers, their peer groups, party or viewpoint, associates or associations, and leaders (including religious leaders).
- The Dunning-Kruger effect suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. To put it simply, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize their impaired critical thinking ability (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017).
- Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel.
- Agnotology is a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (Agnotology, 2016).
- We will next look at the role of information literacy, media literacy and digital literacy.

The Role of Information, Media and Digital Literacies

- Information literacy is relevant for those seeking or verifying information. Information literacy is a “set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information” (Information literacy glossary, 2006). It also includes the ability to evaluate information and its quality.
- Media literacy is relevant for understanding the intent, content, context and their effect on the consumer of media, whether print or online or through different platforms. Media literacy is: “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (Media literacy defined, 2010). This includes deconstructing messages to decipher their true meaning
- Digital literacy is relevant to the ethical use of the online environment, whether personally, professionally or globally. Digital literacy is “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (Heitin, 2016). The difference between digital and the other literacies is not clear, because one can argue that the latter play out in digital environment.

The Limits of Information, Media & Digital Literacies

- Information, Media and Digital literacies work for those are educable, open to rationale discourse and training. But for true believers, those who live in an information filter bubble, or those in a closed propaganda loop, such techniques are not particularly useful.
- Such techniques do not work for partisan, “true” believers shackled to their positions (biases). This is why disinformation campaigns succeed: the recipients are taught to select and transmit only selected sources that confirm the righteousness of their a priori position, including the rejection of any sources that contravene the rightness of their position.
- To address other approaches to this problem, we need to look at:
 - a) Cults
 - b) Addiction to “tribal identity porn”
 - c) The nature of filter bubbles or propaganda feedback loops
 - d) The role of conspiracy theories
 - e) The role and limits of litigation in a democratic society
 - f) Proposing the reinstatement of the fairness doctrine
 - g) The effective use of digital and advertising (see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/us/politics/trump-campaign-acronym.html>)
 - h) Socratic Techniques

On the next pages, you will see a communication model that tries to integrate different approaches and aspects for proper and improper information campaigns:

Structure of Communication Model



- In order to develop a better notion of media or digital literacy, a more extensive model of communication needs to be developed to account for successful disinformation campaigns

18

Sender	Message	Receiver
Sender	Content-Type	Receiver
Predisposition	Context	Predisposition
Intention	Form	Intention
Motivation	Medium	Motivation
Authority	Enhancers	Authority
Cognitive State		Resulting Cognitive State
Intended Target		Received Message

Case of Media Message by Fox News

19

- Fox News Tucker Carlson on April 27, 2020 argued against the lockdowns imposed by medical authorities by appealing two “experts,” Drs. Dan Erickson and Artin Martin, who claimed that the lockdown was excessive, that it undercut economic activity, especially the ability to make an income, and impinged on the rights of citizens to freely associate
- Their research has been discredited by reputable researchers and research organizations – there were statistical errors and contravening evidence of hundreds of medical experts.

Fox New Example: Tucker Carlson



Sender	Example of Disinformation
Sender or Creator	Tucker Carlson (Fox News)
Predisposition of Sender	confirmation bias, make money, willful ignorance, retain political and economic power, avoidance of contrary information
Intention of Sender	to promote Trump's leadership and reelection, by attacking the lockdown as a disservice to the economy and as an infringement on individual rights
Motivation of Sender	to make money/increase profits, to promote Trump's agenda, retain or gain political power, by promoting resentment and chaos against the opposition
Authority	Fox News, their owners, directors, pundits and underwriters; Right Wing supporters and underwriters
Cognitive State	'true' belief, smug self-righteousness knowledge
Intended Target	Trump and right-wing supporters

Message



- In order to develop a better notion of media or digital literacy, a more extensive model of communication needs to be developed to account for successful disinformation campaigns

Message	
Content-Type	appeal to “experts”; pretends to be Aristotle’s logos (appeal to the credibility of the message) whereas it is Aristotle’s pathos (appeal to emotions); it is an appeal to false authority (argumentum ad vericundiam).
Context	Promotion of a political message
Form	Video narrative
Medium	Cable news
Enhancers	Negative polarization/partisanship (stoking anger against the opponent; demonizing the opponent (e.g., the Democratic party, Trump opposers)); repetition through multiple channels – like-minded friends, religious friends, political associates; Dunning-Kroger effect; agnotology;

Receiver	
Receiver	Fox News viewers and their echo chamber (like-minded religious leaders, political leaders, friends, etc.).
Predisposition	Confirmation bias; negative polarization; Dunning-Kruger; Cognitive bias (tending to remember what is already primed in memory; needing to act fast, favoring options that appear to be simple; filtering aggressively so that what to remember is not complicated);
Intention	To get information to confirm/extend/justify their beliefs about Trump
Motivation	To enforce or reinforce beliefs about Trump, to facilitate self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception
Authority	Fox News and its echo chamber; Fox News funders, supporters, collective viewers; right-wing leaders
Cognitive State	According to the receiver, second-hand knowledge, true belief; by rational assessment or expert consensus, false belief
Received Message	Belief in the claimed evidence, disregarding any contravening evidence as fake news. For Fox's perspective it was effective for its intended clientele, but it lacked standards of integrity and professionalism.

Continuing Research

- Problems with the model? Is it too complicated? Can it be efficiently and effectively simplified?
- Can we develop clarity about the differences between predispositions which are largely unconscious, from intention and motivation, both of which are relatively conscious?
- How do we sort out the attempted strategy of disinformation from its actual effects?
- I have been roughshod with research from different subject areas, searching for similarities and ignoring differences. How do I admit of the ambiguities of positions (e.g., whether the willful ignorance is unconscious or conscious), while preserving an overview that tries to analyze and integrate a variety of subject matters, trying to sketch a mosaic that shows the overlap or integration of these views?

References

- For extensive detail about my research which fills out many of the sections of this of this presentation can be found at my website:
<http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/>
- At this site are links to my current publications and curricula for my graduate course, *The Age of Disinformation*.
- In particular see:
- "10 Lessons for the Age of Disinformation," *Navigating Fake News, Alternative Facts and Misinformation in a Post-Truth World*, edited by Professor Kamiz Dalkir, University of Montreal, February, 2020.
<https://www.igi-global.com/gateway/chapter/full-text-pdf/249503>.
- The role of pseudo-cognitive authorities and self-deception in the dissemination of fake news. *Open Information Science*, 3: 115-136, 2019.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2019-0009>.
- Many of the slides are based on the last references, where you will find references in the slides which were not otherwise documented.