



Disinformation - The Scourge of Contemporary Society

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Abstract: In recent years, the term “disinformation” has become a focal point in the attention of the media and public discussions. Fabricated news, which doesn’t reflect reality, has the potential to deeply affect the political, economic, and social lives of individuals, as they are often created with the intention to deceive the public. To understand this issue, it’s necessary to clarify the concept of disinformation. Only then, by deeply comprehending this complex phenomenon, can we develop strategies to limit them. In this article, we focus on three categories that reveal the consequences and disinformation of news. These are flawed information, disinformation, and unintentional misinformation. These categories are closely related, yet they also present essential differences leading to distinct interpretations for each.

Keywords: communication media; information pollution; disinformation; media falseness; flawed information and unintentional disinformation

JEL Classification: K10; K19; K30

1. Introduction

Disinformation is one of the biggest challenges that people are facing globally today, and social media is at the heart of it. The research findings suggest that fake news spreads faster on social media than reliable information. A report issued by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology states that 70% of individuals are more

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likely to share fake news on social media than real news, reaching the public six times harder.

By any terminology - whether it is disinformation, fake news or propaganda - it is a violation of human rights and one of the biggest challenges facing societies around the world, not just in a particular country or region. The spread of disinformation can cause multiple damage to human rights - whether we are talking about civil and political rights or social, economic and cultural rights. The impact can be devastating in various circumstances. As a concrete example and to avoid general discussion, disinformation or fake news can be practically damaging to specific rights, including civil and political rights, or can be guilty of violating specific social, economic and cultural rights.

The definition of disinformation

In order to determine the viability of disinformation, we need to start by developing a definition and then, guided by this definition, identify the prerequisites for disinformation to occur in order to assess whether these conditions can be met.

Disinformation is usually defined as the dissemination or transmission of false information. From this perspective, we could define disinformation as an act of communication in which false information is disseminated, where we could add, but not necessarily, that it would be an act of public communication. Such a definition is not correct because the definition contains metaphorical terms (Bernecker, Flowerree & Grundmann, 2021).

When defining “information” in the aforementioned definition, it is used metaphorically because information has no factual values, therefore there can be no false information. “Information” is a theoretical term, having the role of explaining the reduction of non-determinism. The realization of a contrary among several complementary contraries is explained by invoking information, and information is greater or lesser as the number of complementary contraries is greater or lesser. For example, if someone flips a coin, it would fall on one of two sides. To explain why the coin falls on a particular side, we invoke the information which in this case, under certain conditions, is 1 bit. We note that information cannot be characterized by truth values. Information or misinformation can cause a reduction in variety, for example, it can cause a decision to be made about one’s behavior, i.e. we are dealing with an informational process, but nothing follows from this about any

truth value of the information involved in such an occurrence, since there can be decisions based on both truth and falsehood (Green & Donahue, 2018).

2. Results and Discussions

Consequently, defining disinformation by the term “false information” leads to the situation where disinformation is not possible because, as we have seen, information cannot be false. This error has even made its way into the Criminal Law of the Republic of Moldova, where ‘spreading false information’, under certain circumstances, is punishable by imprisonment of between one and five years, even though such an offense is impossible, because, as we have seen, information cannot be false. This is how we can be punished for acts we cannot commit!

For the purposes of defining disinformation, it is important to recognize that it is an intentional action intended for a specific purpose. Therefore, in order to identify acts of disinformation, we need to consider the purpose pursued by the disinformers. We can assume that the objective of disinformation is to influence the behavior of the receiver. By sending an insincere message, the sender aims to generate certain behavioral reactions on the part of the potential receiver of the message.

Instruments of communication aimed at influencing the behavior of a receiver fall into the category of manipulation. Disinformation is therefore a species of manipulation or a form of manipulation. In order to introduce a specific difference between these two, we consider the means or methods used in disinformation. The sender, through manipulation, using communication techniques, cannot induce a certain behavior on the part of the receiver. The only thing it can do is to influence the receiver to adopt a certain emotional state and, based on this state, to take certain decisions (Legg, 2018, p. 43).

Emotional states can be either correct or incorrect. For example, one may be correctly afraid that a burglar has broken into one’s home, but it is not impossible that one’s fear may be incorrect and that one may be mistaken either about the burglar’s break-in or about the burglar’s intentions. We define disinformation as a form of manipulation in which the sender seeks to influence the receivers of the message to adopt incorrect emotional states, presumably in view of a certain behavior (Cao, Sheng, Yang, Guo & Li, 2020, p. 147).

Emotions can be understood in terms of opinions and attitudes. For example, fear can be expressed by developing an individual's opinion or belief about an event in which the individual manifests a negative response. For example, when asking someone why they feel fearful, that person might respond that they are fearful because they believe that the Earth will be hit by a giant meteorite and that this would be a catastrophe. We see that, in such a situation, fear is the result of a positive belief about a particular event (such as the belief that the event will happen or is already happening) and a negative attitude towards it.

The opinion is the assignment of a truth or alethic value to a sentence. For example, one may believe that the Earth is flat if one believes that the sentence "The Earth is flat" is true and, in contrast, one may not believe this statement if one believes it to be false. Thus, opinions can vary between being positive or negative.

Attitude, conversely, reflects the ethical evaluation, right or wrong, of a statement. Thus, for instance, one might think it is okay for the Earth to be flat, hence expressing a favorable attitude towards this view. Attitudes, in turn, can be favorable or unfavorable. The attitudes can finally be reduced to opinions about the appropriate ethical statements. For example, it is equivalent to regard the fact that the Earth is flat as positive or to believe that the statement "It is beneficial that the Earth is flat" is true.

Conclusively, we see that emotional states derive from relationships between the subject and statements or facts. A statement considered true is accepted in an alethic sense, while one considered false is rejected. Similarly, a statement involving a fact perceived as good is accepted in an ethical sense, while one that is the opposite is rejected. On the basis of statements accepted or rejected alethically or ethically, the subject is in various emotional states.

An emotional state is correct when both the opinion and the associated attitude are considered correct. An opinion is considered correct when the sentence it represents is considered true, and an attitude is considered correct when the fact or situation being evaluated receives an appropriate ethical value from the subject. Accordingly, an emotional state becomes incorrect if the opinion or attitude that comprise it is considered incorrect.

The sender may induce disinformation by conveying messages that incite the interlocutor to adopt incorrect opinions or attitudes. This indicates that disinformation is not exclusively about factual accuracy. A sender could

disseminate correct information that nevertheless implies an incorrect ethical assessment.

For instance, during a campaign aimed at promoting tobacco consumption, the public was given the message C = “Most doctors prefer Camel cigarettes”. Under the circumstances, message C was true, as several surveys showed that doctors who smoked mostly preferred Camel cigarettes. However, this was an act of disinformation, as the purpose of the message was to provoke a favorable attitude towards tobacco consumption, although such an attitude would not have been correct. The sender thus sought to induce an incorrect emotional state in the recipients, even if the message was true (Glaeser & Ujhelyi, 2006, p. 4).

Taking a sender’s perspective, the issue of the possibility of disinformation, or more precisely, under what conditions it becomes possible, is raised. Simplistically speaking, in what situations can we cause people to adopt incorrect emotional states? We note that emotional states can be divided into opinions and attitudes, which are essentially a type of opinion. Therefore, the question of possible disinformation narrows down to the question under what conditions we can influence the formation of incorrect opinions.

The possibility of disinformation

Defining disinformation as causing or influencing opinions makes it impossible. The disseminator of disinformation has no means of inducing someone to adopt a particular opinion, whether correct or not. The development of opinions is subject to the principle of doxastic freedom, which states that opinions are created freely and there are no external factors that determine their formation; the individual freely assigns truth value to a particular sentence. Disinformation would appear not to be possible under this light, as the subject adopts an opinion without external influence.

Nevertheless, disinformation is possible in a weaker form, as influencing the subject to adopt certain opinions. The disinformant cannot produce a particular opinion to the subject, but can influence him to adopt the desired opinion, which may be wrong. Disinformation as persuasion is possible because of the principle of opinion determination, according to which an unbiased opinion is always incorrect. When we talk about an undifferentiated opinion, we mean the absence of attribution of a certain truth value to a sentence. However, in any context, sentences have a specific truth value. Therefore, if in a given context, the

individual does not assign a particular truth value to a sentence, he will be in a state of uncertainty. Realizing that he would like to avoid mistakes, the individual will establish the truth value of sentences, especially those that are relevant to his domain of interest.

Through the principle of opinion determination, the disinformant can send messages that present the acceptance or rejection of a statement as correct or, conversely, as erroneous, and thus influence the subject to accept or reject the statement. For instance, in order to influence the acceptance of a sentence, P, the sender may convey a message presenting a sentence accepted by the subject as a sufficient condition of sentence P. In this case, if the subject were to reject P, then its system of opinions would become inconsequential, it would contain erroneously accepted or rejected sentences. The sender can use the subject's belief system to influence the subject to accept or reject any sentence (Marsh & Yang, 2018, p. 22).

Disinformation, however, does not guarantee that its objectives will be achieved, and the person affected may not accept the false information. Regardless of the techniques used, the disseminator of disinformation cannot be sure of success, due to the principle of doxastic freedom. Even when the disseminator argues for a particular statement P, based on the subject's system of opinions, the subject remains free to accept or reject the statement P, even if this could lead to an inconsistency or reconfiguration of his or her system of opinions.

Rationale for disinformation

Due to doxastic freedom, the receiver of a message can accept it or not, but due to the principle of opinion determination, he cannot avoid the peril of error. Therefore, for the receiver of a message, the crucial issue is whether acceptance or rejection of the message is justified. A message is justified if it does not introduce errors into the receiver's system of opinions. The receiver is faced with the question whether there is any criterion by which to decide whether a message is justified or not (Legg, 2018, p. 48).

The receiver, faced with a received message, is free to decide whether to accept or reject that message. By choosing to accept the message, he will adjust his system of opinions according to the information received. In addition, he will use the message to make decisions and guide his actions, adapting his behavior accordingly. There is however a possibility that, when the message is the result of disinformation, the receiver may adopt views that do not serve his own interests. In

such cases, their actions may do more harm than good, because in situations of disinformation, the messages conveyed are usually in the interests of the sender rather than the receiver.

In the case of a public communication, there is no general interest of the receivers of the message because the audience is on the one hand diverse and on the other hand unorganized. Because of the diversity, the interests of audience members are different and, due to the lack of an organized structure, no common or public interest can be identified. In practice, when the idea of public interest or public interest is invoked in a public communication context, it can be seen that it serves particular interests rather than a common general interest.

Under these circumstances, in order to be in conformity with its own interests, the rational receiver should accept only those messages that are justified, i.e. are in conformity with its interests. Of course, truth is always in accordance with the interests of the receiver, but only that truth which corresponds to the receiver's own states. Therefore, messages that are justified for a given receiver are those that are true, but we have in mind the truth corresponding to the context in which the evaluator finds himself at the time (Trevors, 2019, p. 59).

Once disinformation uses acts of communication, it would seem that a primary justifying factor is the sender or source of the message. For a message to be validly accepted on the basis of the source, the sender should have the truth conditions of the message and not intend to disinform. The receiver cannot verify either of these conditions, so the thesis that we could justify accepting or rejecting a message on the basis of the source or sender of the message cannot be sustained. No matter how "reputable" such a source may be, or how knowledgeable the sender may be, it does not constitute an argument to justify messages coming from it, because the conditions of justification cannot be verified (Fuller, 2018, p. 19).

The only aspect to which the receiver can relate to the source of the message is its interests, since the interests can be identified by an outside observer. The receiver can assume, depending on the interests of the source, whether he is the victim of disinformation and, if so, reject the message (Grundman, 2021, p. 136.).

The receiver comes into contact only with the message, therefore, in order to justify their opinions, the receiver is able to analyze the message. First, the message must be interpreted or understood, i.e. the receiver establishes its truth conditions (Bernecker, 2021, p. 20). The receiver will then apply the criteria of truthfulness to

the message in its various contexts of interest to determine in which of these contexts the conditions are met, and thus the message can be considered true. Through this process, the receiver can determine in which circumstances it is justified to accept the message.

The conditions of veracity of a message may be sufficient or necessary. If a sufficient condition occurs, the message is true, and if a necessary condition does not occur, the message must be rejected as false. For example, in December 1989, the radio station Europa Liberă broadcast the message that there were 60 000 victims during the repression of the Timisoara Revolution. Even a cursory analysis of such a message reveals its falsity, because for almost a quarter of Timișoara's population to have disappeared would have required a major disaster. However, such a necessary condition for the truth of the message did not occur. The message's broadcasters only sought to influence, incorrectly, the emotional states of the listeners (Narita, 2022, p. 20).

The subsequent arguments put forward by the management of the radio station, which stated that the news was based on messages from Romanian officials, are not supported, because, as we have noted, we cannot validate a message solely on the basis of its source. The radio station could have carried out a simple analysis of the message and found that it could not be considered true, and thus refrained from broadcasting it.

The relationship between media ownership concentration and disinformation is significant because the public is manipulated and misled according to the interests of those who control the media. In these circumstances, misinformation has the power to influence the public's choices and perspectives and can alter a citizen's opinion on certain topics.

In the Republic of Moldova, it is essential to distinguish between external and internal sources of propaganda and disinformation.

Disinformation from external sources focuses mainly on anti-Western messages, targeting institutions such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States. Typically, in the run-up to elections in Moldova, a common disinformation narrative supports the idea that the West is interfering in and influencing Moldova's electoral processes. The spread of external propaganda increased significantly with the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. After the Russian army invaded Ukraine in February 2022, disinformation

about Ukrainian refugees spread rapidly; it manifested itself in the dissemination of false information and the promotion of speeches inciting inter-ethnic hatred.

During this difficult period, the level of internal disinformation has increased significantly. Dissemination of internal propaganda is carried out by various entities, including politicians, media sources linked to certain political orientations, pro-Kremlin oriented organizations and/or individuals with Eurosceptic attitudes. This year, the main medium for spreading disinformation has been the messaging application Telegram, which connects users in Moldova with other Internet users in the region and in other countries. Through these and similar platforms, politically affiliated media representatives, politicians or their supporters frequently pick up chat conversations and spread false information. Disinformation from these sources often reflects narratives specific to Kremlin propaganda, including ideas that NATO and the US are responsible for the war in Ukraine, that the Americans are funding biological weapons labs in neighboring countries, and that deny documented incidents of pregnant women being treated in hospitals hit by Russian troops in Mariupol.

Disinformation shockwaves in 2022 have had a significant impact on the population of Moldova. Over the twenty months since the conflict in Ukraine began, Promo-LEX has monitored and analyzed online media, television, social networks and public statements by political actors and opinion leaders. Their findings are alarming: 'Hate speech and incitement to discrimination' were the most frequent topics encountered in hate speech rhetoric, with a focus on nationality. "In the context of the war in Ukraine and the influx of refugees, hate speech and incitement to discrimination or other forms of intolerance have been directed at the group represented by Ukrainians, including Ukrainian politicians and military personnel, refugees of various ethnicities - and by extension at citizens of the United States and Romania." During the monitoring period, the primary platform for spreading hate speech was Telegram, and disinformation directed against Ukrainian refugees was also disseminated via TikTok.

3. Conclusions

Concern about the phenomenon of misinformation is growing both nationally and internationally, and it represents a significant challenge for authorities, civil society, researchers and journalists. In open democratic societies, public debate and accurate information allow well-informed citizens to express their will in free and fair political processes. Quality media play a crucial role in providing citizens with the information they need to form opinions and actively engage in democratic society. In the European Union, democracy is based on free and independent media. Easy access to diverse and reliable information can stimulate participation in democratic processes, providing opportunities for all citizens to get involved. The Internet has profoundly changed the way people access and manage news, increasing the volume and diversity of information available. The article examined the European approach to disinformation, highlighting research by European authorities and recent studies in the Republic of Moldova on the subject.

The phenomenon of disinformation can be mitigated with the support and collaboration of government institutions, academia, the media and civil society. To this regard, we propose some recommendations: Implement effective national and international algorithm-based security information systems to counter this phenomenon. Professional standards for ethical and responsible journalistic practices are an important shield against strategic disinformation and the distribution of incorrect information. Thus, media outlets, in their desire to attract audiences, should be more vigilant about information sources and image manipulation. For consumers, it is essential to access information from multiple credible media sources and to adopt a critical attitude towards any information.

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