

*This very much a work in progress which means I will include more citations that are currently present. This is more of skeletal form of my main points I wish to address. It even lacks a proper conclusion.*

### **Digital misinformation**

*“But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”*

-Socrates, Phaedrus

Socrates quote was directed at the potential dangers against the written word yet can also seem a good admonition against us living in a digital world. From a information management perspective Socrates admonition can be very insightful especially if examine how we partake and share information through the internet. Seems very familiar to information sharing at least when it comes to the internet to repeat what one has heard without ever considering what the thing one is repeating truly entails. This is also quite possibly the major reason that misinformation can spread over the internet since people who do not truly understand the information that they are spreading can be false or inaccurate. People seem to have a natural tendency to assume the information that they find is true without giving thought to what exactly makes it true. This means that the information that we partake in or can potentially spread can be misinformation. Digital technology in itself is not inherently problematic when it comes to the potential of misinformation spreading but because of its accessibility and constant use it enables a higher chance of getting misinformation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what form misinformation takes through digital means and how and why it can be passed along. In this paper we shall also look at misinformation from the perspective of our information behavior. How we seek and process information is very important if we wish to understand how we take part in misinformation. After all it is quite possible that we the users of digital technology are can be a big part of the spreading of misinformation.

### How to define Misinformation

Although this paper will not discuss the differences between misinformation or disinformation and how to separate them and will instead consider both concepts as equivalents when discussing the term misinformation, but what both terms mean will be established. Karlova & Fisher defines misinformation as information that is inaccurate and disinformation as deceptive information. One popular subject on the internet that is prone to misinformation is sales data and it will be our example on on misinformation and disinformation. Disinformation of sales data would be if the sales numbers would be factually wrong of what the actual numbers are ex. a provider for sales data claims that a product sells a million when it sold only half a million. Misinformation in this case would be to use the correct information but to give the data some additional meaning that it does not necessarily deserve ex. a product sells half a million and the provider of the data claims that it is a bad result. What disinformation means here is relatively straightforward while misinformation has more layers to it to what it can mean. Misinformation can also be the misrepresentation of correct data like in the example above. The product selling half a million can still be good number if compared to similar product that did worse not to mention if the product profited despite selling “poorly”.

Misinformation in itself can be difficult to fully identify as it is often dependent on its context. Many things can be regarded as misinformation both intentional and unintentional and in many instances distinguishing information from misinformation can be paper thin. However we will still consider misinformation as a form of information like Karlova & Fisher does:

*“How can it be that we can be informed by misinformation and disinformation? Buckland (1991) wrote that, '[b]eing “informative” is situational' (double quote marks in original). In this sense, informativeness depends on the meaning of the informative thing (e.g., sentence, photo, etc.). Different situations imbue different meanings on different things, and these meanings may depend on the knowledge of the receiver. Buckland's idea illustrates why misinformation can be difficult to define and to identify: what is misinformation in one*

*situation might not be in another because the meanings might be different. The act of disinforming may be weakly situation-dependent compared to misinforming because the intent of the speaker is a constant, even if the speaker does not act on that intent. A deceiver will intend to deceive, regardless of the situation, but someone who simply misinforms may not intend to do so.”<sup>1</sup>*

Context is extremely important when it comes to misinformation and especially if there is a complete lack of context as it is what determines if the information received can be considered truly misinformation. Especially in cases dealing with the likes of sales data since raw numbers in themselves mean nothing less than what kind of meaning we give them. This type of misinformation about sales data is being spread for various reasons most of them business related. The motive for such misinformation is many but it can be as simple as trying to influence people to buy into a product on the virtue of the products popularity. The logic behind it that the more people bought into the product therefore it must be desirable for you as well.

### Digital vs. Analog

In order for us to understand what the possibilities of misinformation is in a digital world we need to understand the possibilities of it in an analog world. To assume that our use of digital technology for our information is inherently more prone to misinformation can be in itself a misleading assumption. It is true that we can be more misinformed because of the easy accessibility of the digital technology but that does not mean that analog technology did not contain misinformation.

What is meant by analog information sources or analog technology in this paper is television, news paper, journals, radio, libraries and social interaction not done through digital technology. Obviously these information methods still exist even though they do not have the same influence and prestige they used to have. The big difference between analog and digital is in many ways is the amount of information and the speed one can access it with. Certainly one could say that analog media has as much content as digital but the difference here is they amount we have access to at the same time. For example a news paper has only so many pages of information that have been chosen by the journalists and editors and has a finite number of information on that particular news paper. In contrast a news site while it can have chosen to narrow the information presented but because it is on a digital medium the number of links and sources and the discussion on social media the news can have is virtually infinite. The only limit in a digital medium is the users own information need

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<sup>1</sup> Karlova & Fisher (2013) Under the headline 'Informativness of Misinformation and Disinformation'

and when it will be met. The amount of information can become quite unwieldy in a digital environment since there are no limit to the information that can be accessed to it can become more difficult to get a better cohesive picture of what the information is about.

The other difference between analog and digital is the speed which it is distributed and accessed. In traditional media the information spread is slower and limited to a select few who can mass distribute them. However, because the information is slower the information distributors can better disseminate the information to check if it is truly factual or not. Due to the fact that news has to come out so fast and different information distributors in the digital media that the accuracy of information becomes secondary. As long as people are the first to break the news story makes it often irrelevant on how true some of the facts are. *“An obsession with always-on speed to market content creates mistakes that echo on the web long after we correct the original.”*<sup>2</sup> That of course does not mean that the information distributors in the traditional media could not make mistakes or were not incapable of disinformation, but they are accountable of the information they distribute in a completely different manner than most information distributors in the digital realm. Journalists or other information distributors in analog media required for the most part not only that they follow a code of conduct but that they also need to have qualifications in order to distribute information. Because anybody can be a information distributor in digital media they do not carry the same sort of responsibility or can be held accountable in the same way as in traditional media.

There is also a change in the social interaction when it comes to information seeking through digital means. In regular social interaction if we desire some information we might ask people we know regardless if they really have the desired information or not. These people can be your family, friends or job acquaintances but regardless of who the people are you ask for information chances are that they are people you are familiar with and are very rarely complete strangers. Even if these people would misinform you that would effect your relationship with them in various ways. In contrast with the digital social interaction you can interact with people you have never met or will ever meet. In digital media you are communicating with more people than you might personally know and some of them might be even experts in various fields that helps your information need by giving relevant information. However, even if they are experts you might not know how these people look or if the name they give you is even their own. Digital social interaction is also limited in the sense that many social cues do not exist in digital form like tone of voice or facial expressions. It is very easy not to understand sarcasm over the internet since it does not translate well into text creating another situation of mistaken intent. What was meant to be a joke can appear

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<sup>2</sup> Smith (2009) p. 24.

to be an insult since the the lack of traditional social cues. Interestingly enough many who use the internet are aware of this which is my different abbreviations and emoticons have come to symbolize their own social cues.

### Reasons for misinformation

There are many reasons for why misinformation is spread in a digital environment some of it is intentional and some it is unintentional. Unintentional misinformation will be discussed later since one cannot truly say that anybody has any motives when they spread misinformation unintentionally besides unintentional misinformation is more interesting from a information behavior standpoint. However, intentional misinformation that exists on the internet always has some form of angle whether it is financial or social. Social misinformation on the internet can take many forms but for the most part they are smaller and quite personal and do not carry the same consequences that misinformation done for financial gain has.

There are a lot of reasons to misinform people and unfortunately they can be quite profitable to the right people to spread misinformation or to misrepresent certain information. Because of the decline of traditional media so has also the balances that kept the traditional media clean from influences that calls into question the validity of many of the digital medias truthfulness. For example in traditional media it is typical to keep the advertisements separate from articles, as in any conflict of interest is avoided by having advertisements for products one is reviewing or otherwise disseminating. As having the products advertisement as one gives a review of the product calls into question the validity of the review and if it can be trusted because of it. This same form of separation does not exist on many websites. In fact many sites feature ads of the very products they review and inform to the public. It is also problematic as in many ads are smart ads that are designed to give people information that is culled from their previous internet browsing history. Meaning that even if one does not intend to advertise the product on gives and impartial review can be advertised because of the smart ad.

Because many sites feature a lot of staff that might not have traditional qualifications or education for journalistic work and is completely lacking any journalistic integrity which means that any information they provide can be very suspect. In fact it is quite typical to have so called click-bait articles which are articles specifically designed to enrage a certain group which in their turn spread existence of the article because of their indignation. Modern monetary gain especially on the internet can be quite ethically bankrupt since sites automatically get their money out of the clicks

they give site even if they do not like anything the site offers information wise. This disgusting behavior is very typical on the internet since in many cases it has been successful for the sites to do so regardless on how frustrated the reader base might become.

### Misinformation behavior

How we misinformation fits in with information behavior is very fascinating especially when it can be us that spread the misinformation as much as the original source of the misinformation. Misinformation has also consequences when we seek information and how we come across this information. In most cases our spreading and seeking of misinformation is unintentional. If we do spread misinformation intentionally then it becomes more an ethical question, even though not all misinformation is negative such as in not being forthcoming of surprise birthday parties or surprise wedding proposals. However, unintentional misinformation is very interesting from the perspective of how we process and seek information since when we do spread it, we do so because we assume the information is correct.

From an information seeking perspective we can separate it into two moments such as purposeful information seeking and accidental information seeking. Purposeful information seeking in all its simplicity means that we have an information need we wish to fulfill. Accidental information seeking on the other hand means that we come across information we did not seek, such as in a random comment section on the internet, but crossed an event horizon where the information was relevant enough for our interests that we stored the information away for future use. While misinformation is very possible in purposeful information seeking there is an even higher chance for it to be true in accidental information gathering since we simply assume the thing we heard was true without ever considering where the information came from or from who. This accidental information that we stored away might become relevant in a future discussion of the same topic where we bring up the information without considering if it is true or not. Depending on how knowledgeable the people in the discussion are they either correct us on the information we have or assume that we know what we are talking about and ends up spreading the misinformation we shared.

If we ever come across somebody that manages to show us how the information we have is wrong we correct our understanding of the information we have and can quite possibly become suspicious or downright distrustful of source where we received the misinformation from. What we might also ignore the source where we got our misinformation from might be no different than us and simply

unintentional spreading the misinformation. Then there is also another option that we do not accept the correction on our misinformation and instead consider the correction of our misinformation to the misinformation.

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