The focus on misinformation leads to a profound misunderstanding of why people believe and act on bad information

Misinformation has been a prominent paradigm in the explanation of social, political, and more recently epidemiological phenomena since the middle of the last decade. However, **Daniel Williams** *argues that a focus on misinformation is limiting when used to explain these phenomena. Primarily, as it distracts us from more important ways in which information can be misleading, and it overlooks the social dynamics of competition involved in information marketplaces that produce effective rationalisations of the favoured narratives of different social groups.*

The misinformation panic

In the aftermath of Brexit and Trump's 2016 presidential victory, the commentariat scrambled for explanations of these surprising and—to many—distressing events. One story that quickly won widespread acceptance appealed to misinformation.

In this narrative, democracies were breaking under the weight of an explosion of false claims, manufactured, propagated, and believed at astonishing rates. The villains of this new "misinformation age" were diverse—Russian trolls, Cambridge Analytica, right-wing propaganda, social media platforms, and more—but the explanatory frame was typically the same: due to a massive increase in the creation and spread of misinformation, large numbers of people were forming false beliefs, and these false beliefs were leading them to make bad decisions.

In recent years, such worries about misinformation have only increased. In 2020, for example, the World Health Organisation's director-general declared amidst the outbreak and devastation of Covid-19 that "we're not just fighting a pandemic; we're fighting an *infodemic*."

The attractions of misinformation

It is not difficult to see what drives this panic about misinformation. First, right-wing populist leaders, including Trump himself, produced—and continue to produce—an alarming torrent of flagrant lies, half-truths, and bullshit.

Second, many people *are* deeply misinformed. Since as long as people have been studying democratic politics, ignorance and misperceptions have been widespread. Current misperceptions and conspiracy theories such as QAnon have struck many commentators as different in both their extremity and popularity, however.

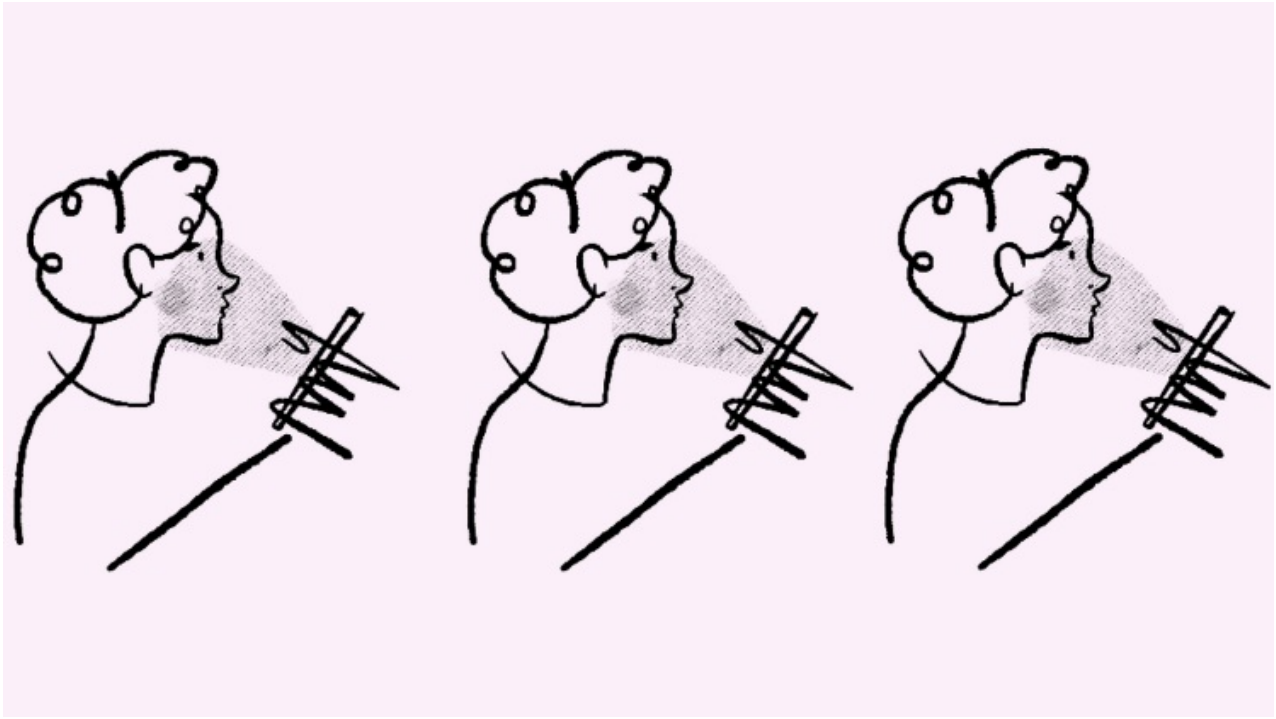
Third, in recent years we *have* witnessed a profound change in information and communication technologies. Social media is now firmly entrenched in the way in which people discuss and learn about the world, constituting a main source of news and political content for some of its users, and it undeniably allows for the rapid spread of information.

Finally, some evidence from the social sciences has seemed to support this new concern. For example, research shows that fake news sometimes spreads at an alarming rate and that many of those supporting right-wing populist movements or challenging public-health guidance are deeply misinformed.

Date originally posted: 2022-09-05

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2022/09/05/the-focus-on-misinformation-leads-to-a-profound-misunderstanding-of-why-people-believe-and-act-on-bad-information/

Blog homepage: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/



The limitations of misinformation

Despite all these attractions, the misinformation panic is largely misguided. Contrary to widespread beliefs, the share of misinformation in most people's information diet is minimal, conspiracy theorising does not seem to have increased in recent years, and those who consume high rates of misinformation are largely hyper-partisans or dogmatists anyway. Moreover, even when people's misinformed beliefs *are* corrected, this often seems to have little effect on their behaviour.

More generally, the popular image of human beings as 'Homo Credulous', gullibly accepting whatever information they come across, is mistaken. Most mass propaganda and advertising campaigns fail abysmally. If anything, people trust too little than too much, placing excessive reliance on their own intuitions than on information from genuinely reliable sources.

> If misinformation is a narrow part of most people's information diet, why do many people seem so profoundly misinformed about the world?

This should not be surprising. Humans are an epistemically interdependent species, utterly reliant on the information we receive from others. This dependence makes us vulnerable, however. Those ancestors who lacked sophisticated vigilance against deception and misinformation would have been quickly outcompeted by their more suspicious cousins.

Nevertheless, this alternative perspective does produce a puzzle. If misinformation is a narrow part of most people's information diet, why do many people seem so profoundly misinformed about the world? And if people are such vigilant social learners, why does there seem to be so much bad and misleading information out there? After all, even if strictly false claims are not ubiquitous, it can hardly be denied that much information seems highly biased and low quality.

A marketplace of rationalisations

In recent work, I've argued that a better framework for understanding at least some of the problems and pathologies of media and communications technology focuses not on misinformation but on motivated reasoning and rationalisation markets.

Date originally posted: 2022-09-05

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2022/09/05/the-focus-on-misinformation-leads-to-a-profound-misunderstanding-of-why-people-believe-and-act-on-bad-information/

Blog homepage: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/

Human beings *are* rational and vigilant – but only when our goal is to form accurate beliefs. We are also motivated to believe things for their emotional, social, or material benefits. This process of motivated reasoning is subject to a rationalisation constraint, however: to believe what I want to believe whilst maintaining an illusion of objectivity, I must acquire evidence and arguments that rationalise my desired conclusions.

> Ambitious individuals and firms compete to produce intellectual ammunition for society's political and cultural factions.

Most research in psychology assumes that the task of satisfying this constraint falls on individuals and their own psychological acrobatics. In many cases, however, motives to form unfounded beliefs align. Most obviously, human beings are profoundly groupish. We are desperate to view the world in ways that reflect favourably on our communities and that protect our reputation and status within them.

When this happens, the result is almost always an emergent marketplace of rationalisations. Ambitious individuals and firms compete to produce intellectual ammunition for society's political and cultural factions. In return for their often-intense cognitive labour, the winners of such competition receive attention, status, and financial rewards.

There are several benefits that come from viewing the social-informational landscape through this lens, as opposed to that of misinformation.

First, rationalisations are not misinformation. Just as defence lawyers cannot afford to be unresponsive to reality, the best rationalisation producers are highly skilled at spinning the truth to reach predetermined conclusions. Not only does this explain how false or unfounded beliefs can often co-exist with low exposure to misinformation, but it also highlights how misguided it is to infer a lack of bias from people's endorsement of discrete factual claims.

Second, and relatedly, rationalisation markets provide a helpful framework for understanding why certain information can often be so misleading even when it is accurate. To the extent that pundits or media organisations exist not to inform, but to rationalise, their insidious impact often lies not in the strict falsity of their content but in the way in which it is integrated and packaged to support appealing but misguided narratives.

Finally, this framework helps to re-orient our understanding of the current media landscape and how it might be repaired. If we understand bad media content and information through a narrative in which people are the gullible victims of disinformation campaigns or social media platforms, we ignore more important questions, such as: Why are people so attached to specific ideas and narratives? And how might different social, political, and economic conditions influence such attachments?

Image Credit: Adapted from visuals, via Unsplash.

Date originally posted: 2022-09-05

Permalink: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2022/09/05/the-focus-on-misinformation-leads-to-a-profound-misunderstanding-of-why-people-believe-and-act-on-bad-information/

Blog homepage: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/