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“Flat Earth” Ideology in *The Masque of the Red Death*

The Masque of the Red Death, by Edgar Allen Poe, is a short story that takes place in a country that had been long devastated by a plague, referred to as “The Red Death”. Its main properties were that it was very gruesome, killing people very quickly. Even with this plague riddling his country, with half of his population dead, the prince, referred to as Prince Prospero, didn’t seem to express much care about the plague. The story even characterizes him as, “happy and dauntless, and sagacious” (2). In light of his utter disregard for the plague, he even goes as far as to hold a masquerade ball with uninfected guests in his castle. This shows that the prince likely didn’t think the Red Death would affect him. Eventually, however, the Red Death, personified as a Grim Reaper-esque figure, killed all of the guests. This essay compares the events that unfold in the story to a modern phenomenon: Flat Earth ideology, or the conception that the Earth is not actually spherical, but instead, flat. Although the idea that the Earth is shaped like a sphere seems to be common knowledge, Flat Earth ideology is surprisingly common (Furze). This essay assumes that the Earth is indeed spherical. Both the prince in *The Masque of the Red Death* and the prevalence of “Flat Earth” ideology demonstrate the spreading of *misinformation*, which is the focus of this essay. Taking into account the events regarding misinformation in *The Masque of the Red Death* and the misinformation within Flat Earth ideology, I argue that there are some crucial factors that influence spreading of misinformation in society. First, in order for misinformation to spread, there must be a powerful entity that

influences the misinformation, either assisting it in being spread, or being the “authority” that many who spread misinformation strive to go against. Next, I argue that the motive of spreading misinformation aligns with the source of misinformation. This means that even though the spreading of information is primarily viewed from an objective standpoint, it is always influenced by bias.

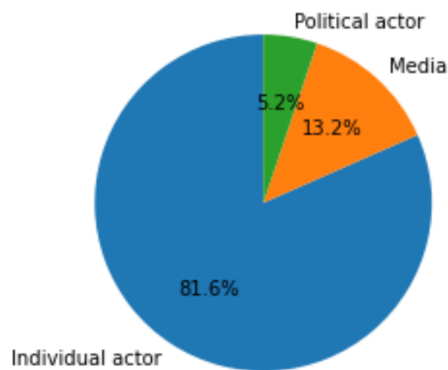
In order for misinformation to spread, a powerful entity that influences the misinformation must be present. This entity either assists in spreading it, or is a source of “authority” that many who spread misinformation strive to go against. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, we can see both of these phenomena coming into play at the same time. The story says, “A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron...They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair from without or of frenzy from within...With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself” (2). This shows that the prince was taking measures to make sure that the Red Death would be unable to reach his place of seclusion. This means that the actual misinformation doesn’t lie in the validity of the plague, because if the prince had thought the plague is invalid then the preventive measures would be useless. However, this does represent a powerful entity that influences the actions of Prince Prospero. The text also says, “When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys” (2). This shows that the prince’s friends’ decisions are being influenced by another powerful entity, the prince. The actual basis of the misinformation can be found when the text says, “And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the

blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall” (14). Here, it shows that even with the Prince’s riches, which allowed him to take extensive measures to protect against the Red Death, he and others did not become safe from the Red Death. Here, the misinformation is represented by the thought that their preventive measures that came from their riches would protect them from the Red Death. Given this, the prince thinking that he will be safe from the Red Death is going against the “authority” that says that he will not be safe from the Red Death: the plague itself. In addition, he himself is a powerful entity spreading misinformation to his friends.

The idea of a powerful entity governing the spread of information can be seen in Flat Earth ideology as well. The concept of the Earth being flat is considered a conspiracy theory (Furze). This means that it is information that is created to oppose widely accepted information. Phys.org says, “...it's due to a general shift towards populism and a distrust in the views of experts and the mainstream media. ‘It's really about the power of knowledge, and that increasing distrust in what we once considered to be the gatekeepers of knowledge – like academics, scientific agencies, or the government,’ Dr. Beckett says” (Furze). This quote demonstrates that conspiracy theories, that are mostly misinformation, arise as a result of distrust in academics, scientific agencies, or the government. All of these are powerful entities and represent the “authority” that people spreading information tend to go against. This shows how conspiracy theories, and specifically Flat Earth are influenced by powerful entities spreading misinformation. This can be connected to misinformation and how it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic, using real world data (ESOC COVID-19 Misinformation Dataset | Empirical Studies of Conflict). After analyzing the data, we can conclude that within the top 50 percentile of occurring values, with all types of misinformation, the source of the data being a powerful entity

(such as the media) occurs on average lower than with only misinformation that is classified as “Conspiracy”. When all types of misinformation was measured from the data in this way, 13.2% of the misinformation came from the media. However, when only conspiracy was measured, 18.0% of the misinformation came from the media, which is almost 5% more (see fig. 1).

All Misinformation



Conspiracy

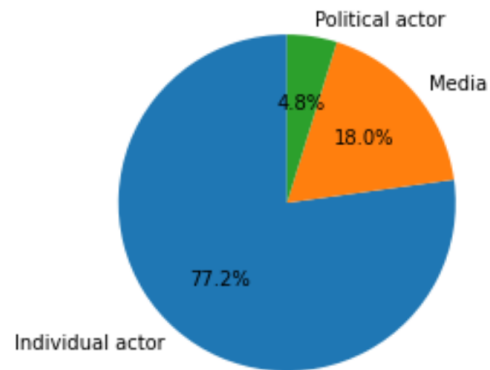


Fig 2. Sources of Misinformation for All Misinformation compared to Sources of Misinformation for Conspiracies, top 50 percentile.

This further proves the point that a powerful entity influences the spreading of misinformation, just like the media largely influences the spread of misinformation from conspiracies.

The motive of spreading misinformation aligns with the source of misinformation. This means that even though the spreading of information is typically objective, it is always influenced by bias. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, Prince Prospero is the primary source of misinformation, and his motive was to keep himself safe from the Red Death, while simultaneously keeping his friends safe. In addition, the story says, “It was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. It was a voluptuous scene that masquerade” (3). This suggests that in addition to

keeping himself and others safe, he also strived to keep himself and others entertained, with the masquerade. The main thing that the motives of Prince Prospero have in common is that they are all heavily influenced by his riches. First, in order to keep himself safe, he takes extreme precautionary measures in terms of the building of the structure. This is only possible due to his riches, as the common person wouldn't be able to take such measures. In addition, he holds the extravagant masquerade with many people in order to entertain himself and them. Similarly, this is only possible due to his riches. This shows that the motives of spreading misinformation align with the source of misinformation. Here, the spreading of misinformation is influenced by bias, on top of power, in that the misinformation only arose and was spread due to Prince Prospero's wealth. Had he not been wealthy, the misinformation likely would not have spread.

The idea that misinformation is biased because the motive of spreading misinformation aligns with the source of misinformation can be seen in Flat Earth ideology. Phys.org says, “Academics are academics not because they're trying to pull the wool over people's eyes, but because we spend a lot of time training and thinking deeply about these issues, says Dr. Beckett” (Furze). This quote first emphasizes the Flat Earther distrust of authority, directly going against that and giving reason to the spreading of accurate information. Secondly, it shows how even when one isn't spreading misinformation, motive still aligns with source. Namely, that academics spread information since they invest time and thought into these ideas and issues, not just to disprove conspiracy theories. Here, motive aligns with the source of misinformation for the Flat Earthers because Flat Earthers are trying to convince people that the Earth is flat, which aligns with their distrust of authority. This creates bias, in that the distrust of authority many Flat Earthers have is the root cause for the misinformation of the Earth being flat, and affects the way they present evidence. This concept can be seen in the COVID-19 Misinformation Dataset as

well. To demonstrate this concept, we start by comparing the top 50 percentile of motives of misinformation for different sources. This comparison tells us some key things about the top 50 percentile of the chosen data. First, it tells us that when the source is a political actor, the motive for the misinformation is politics 63.1% of the time, in comparison to only 21.6% of the time when all sources are taken into account. This is a large difference, of 41.5%. Next, it tells us that when the source is a state sponsor, the motive for the misinformation is to undermine a target country institution 40.7% of the time, in comparison to only 9.7% of the time when all sources are taken into account. This is a large difference, of 31.0%. Finally, the most significant conclusion is that when the source is a company, the motive for the misinformation is profit 86.2% of the time, in comparison to only 0% of the time when all sources are taken into account (keeping in mind that both tests analyze the top 50 percentile of data for *their own* category, which makes this conclusion logical). This is a large difference, of 86.2% (see fig. 2).

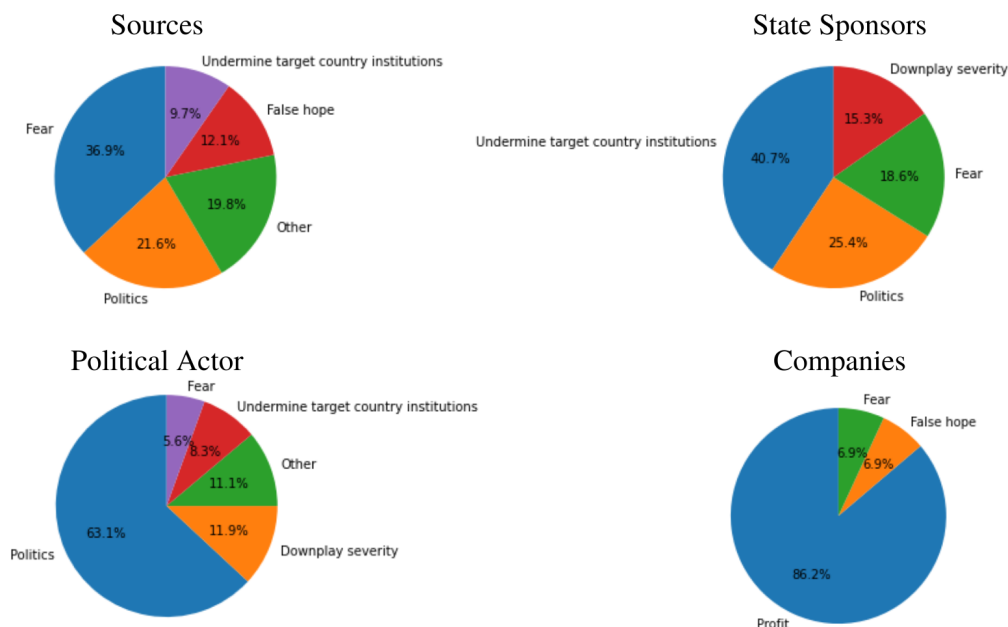


Fig 2. Motives of Misinformation Given Sources of the Information

This comparison proves that when misinformation is spread, the motive of spreading aligns with the source. The comparison shows that political actors, companies, and state sponsors, have motives of politics, profit, and undermining target country institutions, respectively, which aligns well with what one would expect from these sources.

In conclusion, in order for misinformation to spread, there must be a powerful entity that influences the spreading of misinformation. This could either be assisting it in being spread, or being a position of authority that many who spread misinformation strive to go against. Next, the motive of spreading misinformation aligns with the source of misinformation. This tells us that even though the spreading of information is supposed to be fact-based only, it is often influenced by bias. By pinpointing the exact causes and implications of the way misinformation is spread, it may become easier for the general population to deal with misinformation as they encounter it. This could lead to misinformation becoming less influential to the views of people, or less abundant overall, which is one of many steps towards improving society.

Works Cited

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