

Research Assignment: Misinformation

ENG 101: Composition I

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In the United States, misinformation is a persistent problem in our modern-day democracy and affects the quality of democratic discourse and decision-making. It undermines the credibility of institutions like news outlets, erodes trust in experts, and divides public opinion. The causes and consequences of political misinformation are complex and multifaceted, involving psychological and social factors that shape how people process and evaluate information. These factors can occasionally even cause information that is generally accepted as factual to be considered as 'fake' or misleading, known as the *tainted truth* affect. Despite the widespread recognition of political misinformation and its negative impact on our democracy, there is still a lack of effective solutions to address it. This raises the question of why more rigorous and coordinated efforts have not been taken to limit the spread and influence of misinformation, given its serious implications for the health and stability of the American democracy.

Political misinformation has been present throughout most of recent history but has become more prevalent in the last two decades due to the introduction of the internet. Misinformation is often defined as "false or misleading information" (Lazer et al. 2018, as cited in Freeze et al. 2020, p. 1438). Despite the fact that it is present in many areas of society, it is often primarily associated with politics due to its high visibility and the significant impact it has had on public opinion. Within the political environment, misinformation can cause confusion and false claims that result in unnecessary collateral damage to democracies, communities, and individuals physical and mental wellbeing (Wardle, 2019). It does this by pulling on individuals' fears about their own

safety and that of their own loved ones, often giving justification to share information even though it may be against factual claims. This in and of itself increases the spread of misinformation, which is a monstrous problem that has gone unregulated and unnoticed.

The Internet connects billions of people around the world and allows them to share their work faster than ever, traveling near light speed around the earth in only milliseconds. Although it allows for the spread of knowledge to distant corners of the world, the internet is full of information that is not useful and does more harm than good. Internet users often will forward misinformation that they find to be truthful and relatable, but sometimes will spread it without taking in consideration the context of the situation (Wardle, 2019, 3:03). The relatability of misinformation ties in very well with *meme culture*, which involves the spread of captioned images that are intended to be relatable and humorous, even if the topic of the meme is against ones own moral values (Lynch, 2022, p. 48-49). Memes are a powerful way to spread misinformation, often reaching many in short periods of time. Along with memes, misinformation can appear in other forms, such as news cast, articles, and even discussion among friends and family. Sometimes not always being completely untrue, but rather twisting stories and ideas to make sense of phenomenon that are irrelevant. These formats allow individuals to justify their own conclusions and enable them to better spread their opinions and ideas to those around them and likeminded groups or communities (Lynch, 2022, p. 39).

Given its many formats, misinformation has a wide range of effects on the American public and causes a variety of complications within public opinion and debate. This is seen could be seen in the way people consume their information from sources

that distribute political news, data, and analysis. Many put their trust within these institutions and have an expectation that they will be truthful and thorough with their reporting of situations. These institutions are often fact checked by organizations who are specialized in clarifying factual information and recognizing misinformation within sources and data (Freeze et al., 2020, p. 1434). Organizations like these ensure that the public can trust their sources of information and give them reassurance that they are correct. However, these organizations can have adverse effects on individuals' perception between factual and fictitious information. Warnings of misinformation are also common among political parties and their candidates. Their distribution of allegations can cause mass confusing about the accuracy of sources data. This can be seen in a 2011 study on the so-called *tainted truth effect* proposed that "misdirected warnings of post-event misinformation can disadvantage memory of an original event" (Freeze, M. et al. 2020). This allows for misleading information to indirectly reduce the credibility and memory of institutions even though they are reputable and established. Misinformation obscures truth and context within stories and reduces the validity of those who are trying to inform the correct and accurate information about events and situations.

The effect of Tainted-Truth on individuals was tested in a study done by Freeze et al. (2020), which sought to determine how misleading information can affect one's memory and perception of events. A major concern in all studies is confirmation bias especially when one is asked about controversial topics, Freeze et al. (2020) used a cover story to combat this and validate that their findings were accurate. The results of the study showed a relationship between individuals' memory of an event and warnings

of misleading claims (Freeze et al. 2020, p.1447-1448). Results showed how an individual who was warned about an article containing misinformation, will view the news source as less credible. The results of the study helped to acknowledge that warnings of misleading data, claims, and information by individuals and platforms are not always the best at combating the effects of them.

The spread of misinformation can indirectly be fueled by individuals' ego-defense motivation, beliefs, and knowledge. These act as breeding grounds for unverified claims and the spread of conspiracy theories that lead to others questioning the validity of sources and institutions. These theories often employ the use of some truthful information alongside a twist to justify a phenomenon that is otherwise already proven (Albarracín, 2021, p. 200). This correlates with the forms that misleading information takes, where information is twisted in order to make an audience insinuate a plausible scenario. These theories are spread due to the human motivation to have a complete and accurate representation of the world around them (Albarracín, 2021 p. 197). These psychological factors can make individuals believe that what they share is in fact true and accurate when it is in-accurate, obscured, and misleading.

A question that should have been more prevalent in past years, especially given how divided the United States has been, was how we can limit the spread of misleading information. As Wardle (2019) states, action is rarely taken unless platforms are called out by journalists that undertake investigations and find evidence of bias. This shows how larger corporations and platforms must be scrutinized to rid them of misleading information. This could be done by increasing the number of third-party organizations devoted to investigating these cases, and having multiple checks to ensure data is

correct, factual, and unbiased. Likewise, platforms could better vet their sources to ensure they get the most accurate version of the information they are reporting and interpreting. By taking these measures, all Institutions could better contain the spread of misleading information and spread more precise, accurate data.

Another alternative could be to work together with one another to reduce the amount of misinformation being spread. When individuals are thinking about sharing information online, in person, or in articles, they should consider their sources, rationalize why they are sharing the information they are. Individuals should also consider how it will affect that audience in the long run, will they be likely to share that information? How will it change their perspective of that topic and its implications. This goes alongside increased transparency of sources; how do they relate to the topic, where did they originate, and were they relevant to be referenced. By doing this, individuals could contain the spread and limit the effects of misinformation, increasing the quality of information that is shared on the internet, and by creating a better nation and world.

My findings throughout the research support that misinformation is a threat to modern day democracy, and the task of preserving factual information. The effects can be widespread and change individual's memories and perspectives of events. The tainted-truth effect can lead an audience to believe that the data they are viewing is not credible and shouldn't be trusted. Future actions should be taken to limit and contain the spread of misleading content and ensure that individuals and platforms are transparent about their bias and intentions when forwarding information to greater audiences. This

will help to protect the United States democracy and political division among the American public.

References

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