

# The Concept of Disinformation

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## INTRODUCTION

With advances in information technology, *disinformation* has become ubiquitous. Prototypical instances include deceptive advertising (in business and in politics), government propaganda, doctored photographs, forged documents, Internet frauds, fake websites, and manipulated Wikipedia entries. Moreover, disinformation is extremely dangerous. It can easily cause people to make bad decisions about which medical treatments to pursue, about which investments to make, and about which political candidates to vote for.

We can try to address this threat to Information Quality by developing (a) techniques for identifying disinformation and (b) policies for deterring its spread. However, we first need to understand exactly what disinformation is. This entry surveys the research that has been done by philosophers and information scientists toward an analysis of this concept. In addition, it briefly describes how such an analysis can help us deal with the serious problem of disinformation.

## BACKGROUND

Inaccurate information (or *misinformation*) can arise for a variety of different reasons. For instance, it can be the result of an honest mistake, negligence, or unconscious bias. But inaccurate information is particularly dangerous when it is *intentionally* disseminated in order to bring about false beliefs. Unlike honest mistakes, disinformation comes from someone who is actively trying to mislead us (see Piper 2002, 8-9, Fetzer 2004). In addition, the best way to deal with disinformation will probably be different from the best way to deal with other types of inaccurate and misleading infor-

mation. For instance, the clues that someone is lying to us are likely to be different from the clues that she just does not know what she is talking about. Thus, we need to improve our understanding of exactly what disinformation is.

The standard methodology for clarifying concepts is known as *conceptual analysis* (see Margolis & Laurence 2011, §5). An important project in Information Science is the analysis of the concept of *information* itself. Many different analyses of information have been proposed (see Fox 1983, 39-74, Floridi 2005). This entry evaluates the various analyses of *disinformation* that have been proposed. The goal of such analyses is to identify a concise set of necessary and sufficient conditions that correctly determines whether or not something falls under the concept in question. With respect to the concept of disinformation, researchers want to find a list of criteria such that (a) all instances of disinformation satisfy these criteria and (b) only instances of disinformation satisfy these criteria.

Analyses of concepts often come very close to correctly capturing the concept in question. However, when they are tested against a variety of particular cases, many analyses turn out to be inadequate. First, an analysis can be *too broad*. For instance, an analysis of disinformation might count as disinformation things that clearly are not instances of disinformation. That is, things that differ in important ways from prototypical instances of disinformation (e.g., they do not pose a similar risk of harm to the recipient) satisfy the criteria of the analysis. Second, an analysis can be *too narrow*. For instance, an analysis of disinformation might not count as disinformation things that clearly are instances of disinformation. This entry provides cases that establish that each analysis of disinformation that has been proposed (save one) is too broad, too narrow, or both.

## ANALYZING THE CONCEPT OF DISINFORMATION

### Disinformation is a Type of Information

The first thing to note about disinformation is that it is a type of information. As noted above, several different analyses of information have been proposed. For our purposes here, we do not have to settle on one specific analysis of information. We can make do with a fairly common sense understanding of this concept. Basically, information is something that *represents* some part of the world as being a certain way (see Scarantino & Piccinini 2010, 324, Floridi 2011, 80). For instance, the sentence “The cat is on the mat” represents the cat as actually being on the mat.

Admittedly, some researchers (e.g., Dretske 1983, 57, Floridi 2011, 260) do not think that disinformation is a type of information. They claim that, in order for something to be information, it must be true. According to the philosopher Fred Dretske (1983, 57), “false information, misinformation, and (grimace!) disinformation are not varieties of information—any more than a decoy duck is a kind of duck.” However, other researchers (e.g., Fox 1983, 157, Scarantino & Piccinini 2010) claim that information can be false. For our purposes here, we do not have to settle this debate. If we want to accept the stipulation that information must be true, we can just say that disinformation is a type of *representational content*.

### Evaluation of Proposed Analyses of Disinformation

#### Floridi 1996

In one of the earliest discussions of the concept of disinformation, the philosopher Luciano Floridi (1996, 509) claims that “disinformation arises whenever the process of information is defective.” However, this analysis is too broad. When someone makes an *honest mistake*, like *The Chicago Tribune* reporting that “Dewey Defeats Truman,” something in the process is defective. But honest mistakes clearly are not disinformation. In such cases, the source of the information does not benefit from people being misled. Also, as suggested above,

indicators of such *accidentally* inaccurate information are likely to be different from indicators of intentionally inaccurate information.

#### Floridi 2005

Several years later, Floridi (2005, §3.2.3) claims that “when *semantic content* is *false*, this is a case of *misinformation* (Fox [1983]). And if the source of misinformation is aware of its nature, one may speak of *disinformation*.” In other words, disinformation is inaccurate information that the source knows to be inaccurate. This analysis repairs the shortcoming with Floridi’s 1996 analysis. It does not count honest mistakes as disinformation. When they ran the “Dewey Defeats Truman” story, the editors of *The Chicago Tribune* were not aware that the story was false.

However, Floridi’s 2005 analysis is also too broad. For instance, when you tell a joke or speak sarcastically, you are aware that what you are saying is false. But you are not spreading disinformation. The story in *The Onion* that “Al Gore Places Infant Son in Rocket to Escape Dying Planet” was not disinformation. Although people who do not know that *The Onion* is satire might be misled (at least briefly), such inaccurate information does not pose the same risk of harm to the recipient that prototypical instances of disinformation do.

#### Fetzer 2004

The philosopher James Fetzer (2004, 231) claims that disinformation “should be viewed more or less on a par with acts of lying. Indeed, the parallel with lying appears to be fairly precise.” In other words, disinformation is a statement that the speaker believes to be false and that is intended to mislead. This analysis repairs the shortcoming with Floridi’s 2005 analysis. For instance, it does not count jokes and sarcasm as disinformation. Jokes and sarcasm are not lies because they are not intended to mislead (see Mahon 2008, §1.4).

However, Fetzer’s analysis is also too broad. Someone who intends to spread disinformation with a lie might not succeed in doing so. For instance, suppose that the police ask about your friend’s whereabouts and that you want to mislead them about where he is. You believe that he is staying with his cousins outside the city. So, you say to the police, “He is hidden in the

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