Why We Believe Disinformation

An Argument for Strategic Communication

By

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Introduction

The issue of disinformation has become one of the most widely discussed phenomena in society today. There is currently a plethora of publications, platforms, and activist movements dedicated to addressing disinformation. With our book, we aim not merely to join this trend or ride the wave of popularity. Our objective is to offer readers a comprehensive perspective on this phenomenon, which is reflected in the diverse composition of our author team. Each of us hails from a different professional background: one is a marketing and communication specialist with experience in multinational corporations, another is a security expert with extensive government service, and the third is an academic. Our diversity extends beyond professional expertise to encompass differences in age and life experience.

Several factors prompted us to write this book. Firstly, there has been a significant increase in disinformation narratives, catalysed primarily by the COVID-19 pandemic. The public sphere has been inundated with disinformation concerning the origin and spread of the disease, as well as resistance to COVID-19 measures such as lockdowns and vaccinations.

Secondly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine further exacerbated this issue. This event sparked a new wave of disinformation narratives across social media and public discourse. Over time, it fostered the development of an ecosystem involving disinformation actors and their ties to various anti-establishment groups.

Another factor driving us to write this book was the social dynamics spurred by disinformation. Technological advancements have accelerated the speed and scale of spreading various disinformation narratives, while also evolving their presentation into more sophisticated forms. Many countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, struggle to effectively combat these waves of disinformation. Consequently, they often resort to measures that inadvertently reinforce the beliefs of both disseminators and consumers of disinformation.

Simultaneously, trust in the state and its institutions begins to erode. Moreover, populations in post-communist countries are highly sensi-

tive to issues of freedom of speech, viewing restrictive measures as echoes of past censorship eras.

The goal of our publication is to present disinformation not just as a modern phenomenon, but as one with a historical context. Fake information has existed for centuries, used by states, institutions, interest groups, or individuals for various purposes. We aim to provide a historical perspective on disinformation to help readers better understand its mechanisms.

Additionally, we highlight the diverse nature of disinformation. It's not solely negative; at times, it has played and continues to play a positive role in society. We present historical examples where disinformation narratives acted as catalysts for social processes, both within the Czech Republic and globally. Today, the fight against disinformation is a critical issue. States, international institutions, and the private sector are all seeking tools to prevent its spread and mitigate its harmful impacts. It's important to note that there's no definitive guide on how to achieve this goal. Various approaches exist, each tailored to specific social climates and circumstances, but they also come with inherent risks.

Finally, we aim to present several approaches for navigating the contemporary information landscape, not only for states and companies but also for ordinary citizens. Our intention is not to create another guide to combatting disinformation, a topic that has become a prevalent cliché of our times. Instead, we want to explore what individuals can do to avoid falling into the traps of rumours and conspiracy theories.

Our book, titled "Why do we believe disinformation? An Argument for strategic communication reflects our goal. We have reached a point where verifying factual accuracy and critically assessing information seem increasingly challenging. Despite advances in education, there is a paradoxical trend towards embracing information that lacks rational basis. Why, for instance, do educated individuals believe in conspiracy theories or propagate disinformation? It's a perplexing question we seek to address. Central to our exploration is defining terms like disinformation, fake news, and hoaxes accurately and understanding how they should be used in context. We aim to provide clarity on these concepts and tackle other pertinent questions in our publication.

Chapter 1

Disinformation in the information society, or we have entered a vicious circle

In the 1970s and 1980s, the rise of what became known as the "information society" began to take shape. The integration of information and communication technologies into everyday life ushered in an era where we are bombarded with an unprecedented volume of messages, facts and information. The optimistic visions put forth by proponents of this concept, such as Alvin Toffler, Joneji Masuda, and Manuel Castells, however, have only been partially realized. Undoubtedly, people today enjoy far greater access to information than they did fifty or sixty years ago. Yet, this abundance has posed a critical question: are we equipped to navigate this vast sea of information effectively? So, what has the information society truly brought us?

We live in a world of post-truth, or the decay of truth

The era we currently inhabit is often termed by Anglo-American authors as the "Post-Truth World" or "Truth Decay". The advancement of digital technologies and the rise of online platforms connecting vast numbers of people have led to the rapid dissemination of information, fundamentally altering how we consume it.

Despite having access to a wealth of high-quality information across various fields, many of us lack the specialized knowledge necessary to fully comprehend it. Consequently, we often find ourselves in the role of information evaluators and fact-checkers, relying more on personal experience than on professional expertise. Through online social networks, we propagate our opinions to others while simultaneously being exposed to and adopting similar viewpoints uncritically.

This situation creates a conflict between factual information, its anal-

ysis, and professional interpretations on one hand, and the attitudes and opinions shaped by personal experiences on the other. As a result, there has been a decline in trust towards traditionally respected sources of scientifically-grounded information, with lay opinions increasingly taking center stage.

A striking example was the situation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in its early stages from 2019 to 2021. During this period, the opinions of celebrities, certain politicians, and self-pro-claimed experts often gained more prominence in the public sphere than those of scientists, doctors, and other authoritative figures. This phenomenon extended beyond debates about the disease's origins to include discussions on mask-wearing and vaccinations.

The following graph illustrates how trust in official media and institu-tions has declined in recent years in the USA.

Source: https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-downaverage-new-low.aspx
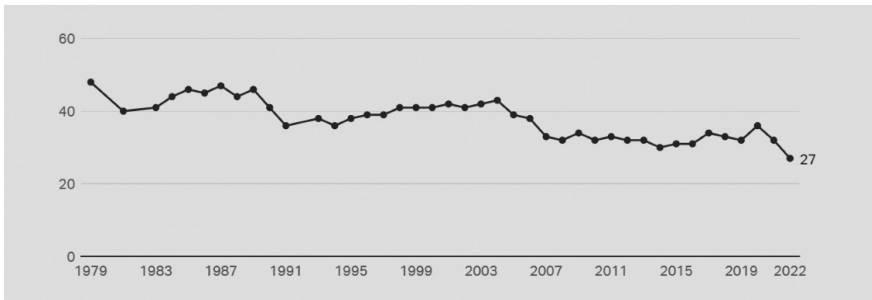
What has driven this trend? Why do people adopt such attitudes? It could be said, somewhat exaggeratedly, that individuals have grown accustomed to the information-rich environment of the modern era. They increasingly prioritize selecting opinions and facts that validate their existing beliefs, a phenomenon we refer to as self-affirmation. We will delve deeper into this concept later in our discussion.

Simultaneously, the societal information landscape has undergone profound changes. The advent of social networks has led to a surge in information volume and its rapid dissemination. Meanwhile, the

media landscape has transformed significantly, with news reporting now operating on a twenty-four-hour cycle, bombarding people with a continuous stream of updates.

On the flip side, the education system is falling behind, struggling to keep pace with the evolving demands imposed by the information age. In an attempt to maintain competitiveness, which largely translates into swiftly meeting market demands and specialized training, there's been a reduction in emphasis on subjects like civic education, media literacy, and critical thinking. Yet, these very skills are crucial for individuals to effectively evaluate information sources, discern biases, and differentiate between facts and opinions.

Furthermore, political, socio-demographic, and economic polarization exacerbate this issue. The prioritization of opinions over facts and the tendency for social groups to isolate themselves within information bubbles contribute to their segregation. Within these isolated echo chambers, there exists an autonomous environment conducive to sharing opinions, but also disinformation. These trends foster a greater susceptibility among people to consume and propagate such disinformation.

What is hidden under the label of disinformation

Before delving into how disinformation operates within society, it's essential to clarify what falls under this term. Today, we encounter various labels such as fake news, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, or propaganda. These terms have been extensively studied across different scientific disciplines including linguistics, media studies, political science, and journalism. However, the plethora of definitions can often be confusing or misleading.

The most commonly used term is disinformation. Consulting any standard dictionary reveals its Latin roots: "dis" meaning negative, and "informare" meaning to shape opinion. Disinformation refers to false or distorted information deliberately spread with the intention

to influence individuals, groups, or society as a whole, often targeting public opinion. This influence can be both detrimental and beneficial. For instance, consider the case of the alleged killing of student Martin Šmíd on Národní třída on November 17, 1989. While ultimately untrue, the dissemination of this disinformation discredited the regime and encouraged citizens to become more active in overthrowing it.

Disinformation can originate not only from individuals or interest groups but also from governments, intelligence services, or as part of information operations in armed conflicts. A notable historical example occurred in 1941 when a significant portion of the American population opposed U.S. involvement in the war against Nazi Germany. To sway public opinion, the British intelligence service fabricated a map of South America, falsely showing how Nazi Germany planned to divide the continent. This deceptive map stirred concerns among Americans, leading to a shift in attitudes towards supporting their country's entry into the war.

Similarly, during the 1980s, the Soviet KGB propagated disinformation regarding the origin of AIDS, falsely claiming the virus was developed in American laboratories. An article on this topic was planted in an Indian newspaper, spreading the disinformation further.

In contrast, the term misinformation is closely related but used less frequently. It refers to false information that is not spread with the deliberate intent to deceive or influence. Rather, misinformation often arises from ignorance or misinterpretation of facts. For instance, former U.S. President Donald Trump's assertion that hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug, could protect against COVID-19, could be classified as misinformation. Although the drug alleviated some symptoms and was endorsed by a few doctors, the World Health Organization (WHO) subsequently prohibited its use due to potentially fatal side effects.

Another term we encounter less frequently in the Czech context is malinformation, which was highlighted by authors Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan in their 2017 report for the Council of Europe. They included it alongside disinformation and misinformation as a distinct

concept. Malinformation refers to true information that is deliberately spread with the intent to harm someone. This could involve leaking private information that is intentionally made public, such as the publication of compromising photos of politicians or celebrities in sensitive situations.

The aim of malinformation extends beyond damaging the reputation of individuals to targeting brands, companies, or even countries. For instance, during the war in Ukraine, pro-Russian propaganda surfaced historical narratives, like the roles of figures such as Stepan Bandera or the Volyn massacre in 1943, in an effort to discredit the Ukrainian pro-Western government.

These definitions are closely intertwined and often overlap in practice, though disinformation tends to be the prevailing concept in discourse.

INFORMATION DISORDER

FALSE   HARMFUL

Mis-Information   Dis-Information   Mal-Information

False Connection   *False Context*   *Leaks*
Misleading Content   *Imposter Content*   *Harassment*
                              Manipulated Content   *Hate speech*
                              Fabricated Content

Source: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77
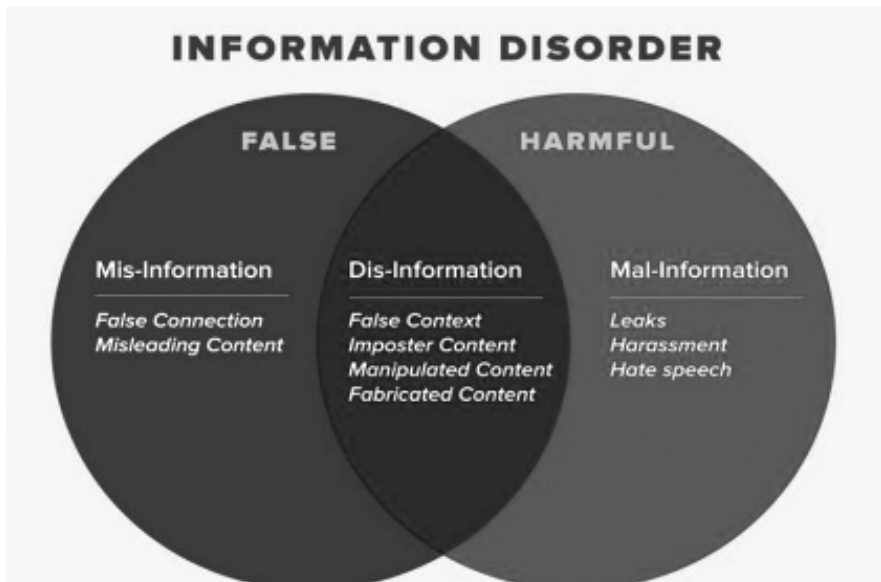
Digitization, electronic media, and online social networks have popularized another concept known as the hoax. While not entirely new, its origins date back to the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and are primarily associated with journalism. A hoax can take the form of false news, a rumor, an alarmist report, a joke, or what's known as a jour-

nalistic duck. At its core, a hoax typically revolves around a sensational and highly emotional topic. To enhance credibility, it often involves a well-known person, celebrity, expert, or recognized authority.

The primary aim of a hoax is to disseminate emotionally charged information while persuading readers to share it further. It frequently manifests as alarmist chain messages that propagate through social networks or email. A hallmark of a hoax is its enticing headline, often referred to as clickbait, designed to compel readers to click on the link and subsequently share it. One example of a hoax is the forwarding of a "Momo" message. Recipients were asked to take part in the so-called "Momo Challenge", which targeted children and youth via WhatsApp. The challenge was to contact an animated horror character and then complete certain tasks. If they did not pass on the message, a threat was made that a horror figure, supposedly already dead, would pay a terrifying visit at night.

An example of a hoax: WhatsApp-Kettenbrief "Momo"
Source: https://twitter.com/guardiacivil

In the realm of journalism, another concept we encounter is fake news. This term refers to the deliberate dissemination of news that appears credible at first glance, leading the reader to perceive it as factual. The report typically includes genuine facts but is intertwined with misleading or outright false information.

A notable example occurred in March 2018 when Russian ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok. This deadly substance was developed within the former Soviet Union's territory. However, Russia accused the Czech Republic of producing the specific Novichok used in the poisoning. The Czech government refuted this claim, and subsequent investigations revealed that while Novichok was indeed produced in Czech laboratories, it was a different variant from the one used on Skripal and his daughter. Despite this clarification, the Russian side omitted this crucial detail from its communications, thereby presenting a message that was only partially true.

Fake news gained prominence, particularly during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, when his supporters deliberately prop-agated falsehoods, including claims that even the Pope endorsed Trump's candidacy. Following his election, Trump notably politicized the term "fake news," using it to discredit established media outlets which he accused of spreading false information and distorting facts. A similar trend emerged in the Czech Republic, where President Miloš Zeman and his press spokesman Jiří Ovčáček targeted certain media, branding them as purveyors of fake news.

Another term relevant in this context is "rumour." Rumours are fictional, partially true, or outright false pieces of information about a person or an event. They typically arise in situations where the public lacks complete understanding or official authorities refrain from providing clarifications. In the United States, systematic investigations into rumours began during World War II, spurred by widespread disin-formation about Japanese attacks on American territory or premature declarations of war's end.

In Czech history, an illustrative example dates back to 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when fears of nuclear conflict prompted a rumour that survival from an atomic attack was possible only if one sheltered in a barrel filled with salt. This led to a rush on salt purchases in Prague at the time.

Closely intertwined with rumours are conspiracy theories, narratives that attempt to explain events or phenomena with hidden causes that are often speculative or unproven. These theories frequently revolve around notions of global conspiracies or secret plots orchestrated by powerful entities.

One prominent example is the "Great Reset" theory, which posits a left-wing conspiracy aimed at establishing a totalitarian world government. According to this theory, the COVID-19 pandemic was allegedly engineered by the global financial elite and world leaders to manufacture a crisis, paving the way for the imposition of a single leftist regime.

Conspiracy theories also cast doubt on historical events, such as the moon landing of Apollo 11, or challenge the official accounts of famous figures' deaths, like Adolf Hitler or Elvis Presley. For instance, a 2018 article in The Guardian reported that 60% of Britons believe in some form of conspiracy theory, spanning topics from migration to Brexit. These theories often gain traction by exploiting uncertainties and distrust in official narratives, appealing to individuals seeking alternative explanations for complex events.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories go hand in hand

Much disinformation stems from conspiracy theories, so it's useful to delve into how they operate. Fundamentally, conspiracy theories hinge on the belief that significant events are orchestrated by secretive groups like the Illuminati, or influential figures such as George Soros or Bill Gates. These theories tend to resist debunking because any evidence disproving them is often dismissed using circular reasoning: contradictions or challenges are interpreted as further proof of the conspiracy's existence. Conspiracy theorists often argue that evidence against their theories is deliberately concealed or manipulated by the alleged conspirators themselves. This circular logic perpetuates belief in the conspiracy despite contradictory facts or expert consensus to the contrary.

Circular thinking is a concept crucial to understanding how conspiracy theories operate. It refers to a type of thought pattern where reasoning becomes self-reinforcing and does not lead to new insights or development of understanding. Instead of exploring alternative viewpoints or seeking evidence, individuals may stick to their beliefs out of fear or reluctance to confront unfamiliar ideas. This tendency often underpins belief in conspiracy theories.

Disinformation embedded within conspiracy theories spreads despite contradictory evidence. Some social psychologists suggest that believing in conspiracy theories can even be considered pathological. Furthermore, conspiracy theories exploit cognitive biases such as the illusion of logical patterns. This bias causes our minds to create "logical explanations" by connecting unrelated information. For instance, people might perceive a causal relationship between unrelated events simply because they occur in sequence.

For example, consider the correlation between ice cream consumption and shark attacks. During summer, when the weather is warm, more people swim in the sea and eat ice cream. If shark attacks increase during this time, some might mistakenly attribute it to ice cream consumption rather than the seasonal factors driving both behaviours. This illustrates how our minds can misinterpret correlation as causation, a common pitfall in understanding causal relationships.

The more complex explanations we get, the easier it becomes to use apparent correlations for conspiracy theories and generating disinformation. As an example, we can cite the following graph, which shows the connection between movies with Nicolas Cage and the number of drownings in swimming pools. People often come to bizarre conclusions that the number of drownings in the pool is related to the number of movies watched with this actor.

Causality vs Correlation: Number of Nicolas Cage Films and Number of US Pool Drownings
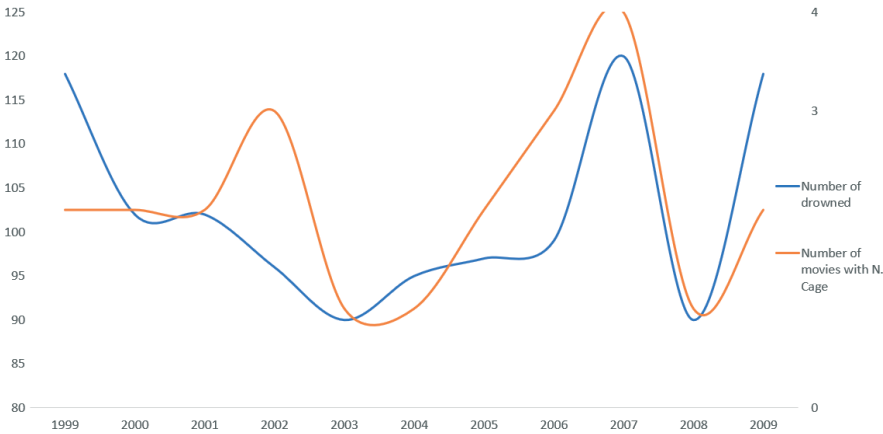
Source: Center for Disease Control Prevention, Internet Movie Database

Complex global phenomena provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories and the proliferation of disinformation. Take, for instance, the period during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one conspiracy theory, the outbreak of this disease was attributed to the deployment of 5G networks. In the UK, this belief even led to the destruction of cell towers. Elsewhere, there are beliefs that the vapor trails left by airplanes (known as chemtrails) are also somehow linked to the spread of the disease.

Studies indicate that in developed societies, at least half of the population subscribes to at least some conspiracy theory. Moreover, around a fifth to a sixth of the population holds steadfast convictions about their truthfulness. Belief in conspiracy theories bolsters a sense of unity and belonging within specific groups, further amplifying the herd effect. Additionally, many of these theories exploit our inclination to defer to authorities and celebrities, who frequently propagate disinformation related to conspiracies.

Moreover, individuals who believe in one conspiracy theory often begin to accept others as well. This sets off a snowball effect, where one conspiracy theory builds upon the next, eventually leading to belief in a mega-conspiracy. As Dutch social psychologist Sander van den Linden

demonstrates, people are capable of endorsing multiple conspiracy theories, even when these theories frequently contradict each other.

Propaganda as an inherent amplifier of disinformation

In our overview, we must also acknowledge another crucial aspect: propaganda. Fundamentally different from disinformation, propaganda serves as an ideological tool to propagate specific beliefs or actions among the populace, directed by a controlling group within a given society. Disinformation often forms a key component of the information disseminated under this guise. In this context, it is pertinent to mention Ladislav Bittman, a Czech expert on disinformation and propaganda, who defected to the American side after 1968, having previously served as a communist intelligence officer.

Bittman discussed various forms of propaganda, each with distinct purposes and methods. One type is white propaganda, exemplified by radio broadcasts aimed at foreign audiences to influence their opinions openly. Another form is black propaganda, primarily orchestrated by intelligence services, which involves disseminating false news, forging government documents containing compromising information, or feeding disinformation to the media. The convergence of these approaches gives rise to grey propaganda, which can involve publishing distorted reports on corporate or governmental management, blurring the line between truth and manipulation.

So what is disinformation?

In our exploration, it's clear that disinformation encompasses a fairly extensive conceptual framework. So, what defines disinformation and how can we characterize it? Our aim isn't to devise a new definition but rather to delineate the distinctive traits and indicators by which we classify disinformation, regardless of its form. Within this framework, we understand disinformation as false information deliberately spread, with intentional dissemination being a pivotal element. The objective

of a disinformation message isn't merely to persuade people to believe it or even to act upon it in some cases, but also to propagate it further. Therefore, under the umbrella of disinformation, we can encompass hoaxes, chain emails, and any intentionally manipulated information or message content. This scope also encompasses fake news and, more broadly, rumours and conspiracy theories as forms of disinformation.

It's important to acknowledge that the distinction between these concepts is quite delicate. Consequently, labelling a particular statement, information, or message as disinformation, misinformation, or simply inaccurate is often challenging. This complexity complicates efforts to implement regulatory or even punitive measures.

Furthermore, we must recognize the potential positive impact of disinformation or disinformation campaigns, as previously discussed. Political systems and their representatives, whether benefiting from or harmed by disinformation, wield significant influence in determining what constitutes disinformation. Hence, the determination of what qualifies as disinformation frequently intersects with the political authorities currently in power.

Hence, arriving at a universally accepted definition of disinformation proves to be quite challenging. However, it remains imperative to establish some framework for understanding and addressing it.

In summary, disinformation can be defined as false or manipulated information deliberately spread with an emotional undertone that encourages its dissemination. Its primary aim is to influence the behaviour and beliefs of social groups or entire societies. The impacts of disinformation can vary, ranging from detrimental to potentially beneficial. Moreover, the classification of what constitutes disinformation is closely intertwined with the political landscape and prevailing circumstances within a given society or organization.

Chapter 2

History of disinformation: from Gilgamesh to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

A very fundamental question is whether disinformation is a recent innovation or has been around before. The majority of the professional public agrees that disinformation has been present in history for many centuries and can thus be characterized as an ancient phenomenon that accompanied humanity in the form of oral, written or visual messages from a wide range of actors. Over time, however, they took on different forms, meanings and designations. However, their purpose, to confuse or besiege the opponent, has not essentially changed over the centuries.

Let's take a short historical excursion and look at some milestones, how this phenomenon developed over the centuries and how humanity reacted to it.

Disinformation's presence throughout human history is illustrated by its appearance in one of the oldest surviving works of epic literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. In 2019, Dr. Martin Worthington, a specialist in the Middle East, highlighted this discovery. In this famous epic, the god Ea attempts to deceive humanity by spreading false information. He informs the Babylonian Noah that if people assist him in constructing his dream ark, food will rain down from the sky. Ea's message appears to promise beneficial rainfall in the form of food, but it conceals a warning of an impending flood. According to Worthington, this tale may well be the earliest documented instance of what we now call fake news.

Master Sun-tzu as the forerunner of information operations strategists

The profound significance of disinformation was recognized early on by the ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher Master Sun-tzu

(circa 544 BC – 496 BC). During his lifetime, he penned the renowned treatise "The Art of War," which remains one of the oldest and most influential works on military strategy and tactics. Sun-tzu was notably ahead of his time in his insights into warfare, which continue to resonate today, making his book essential reading in numerous military academies and institutes of security and strategic studies.

In addition to conventional combat strategies, Sun-tzu emphasized the art of manipulation. He famously stated that "war is above all an ingenious ruse," highlighting the importance of deceiving the enemy. One effective tactic he discussed was the dissemination of false information. Sun-tzu advocated using scouts to spread misleading reports: "Use your spies for every kind of business. If there is a lie to be spread, the dead scouts are spread over and in their knowledge you will understand what the lie is about." While Sun-tzu did not delve extensively into the specifics of disinformation's role in warfare, he was among the first to recognize its strategic potential in confusing adversaries and gaining tactical advantages.

In antiquity, another intriguing episode linked to disinformation unfolds during the Roman Empire, notably at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. This naval clash marked a pivotal moment for Rome, where the stakes were nothing short of the empire itself. Professor Barry S. Strauss of Cornell University draws attention to Actium as a critical lesson in managing disinformation campaigns: when political leaders speak of conflict, be prepared for disinformation.

The Battle of Actium erupted amid a brewing civil war between Octavian, Caesar's adopted heir, and Marc Antony, one of Caesar's staunchest generals. Octavian recognized the necessity of swaying public opinion in his favour during this power struggle. To achieve this, he launched a series of fabricated reports aimed at tarnishing Antony's reputation. Octavian alleged that Antony was engaged in an illicit affair with Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen, and accused him of disregarding Roman values such as loyalty and dignity. Furthermore, Octavian propagated rumours that Antony was unfit to hold office due to his purported drunkenness.

Octavian disseminated these narratives through various mediums, including poetry and succinct slogans minted on coins—an ancient equivalent to today's social media posts. Ultimately, Octavian's disinformation campaign played a crucial role in his victory over Antony, paving the way for Octavian to consolidate power and become Rome's first emperor, reigning for over four decades. This historical example underscores the enduring strategic use of disinformation in shaping public perception and influencing the outcomes of significant events.

The printing press as an accelerator of the spread of disinformation

Considerations about disinformation did not fade away even during the Middle Ages. The renowned Italian satirist Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) captured this phenomenon in his writings: "Sow seeds of doubt in the minds of readers and shape the complex political reality of the time."

However, a pivotal moment in the proliferation of disinformation emerged with the advent of the printing press in the 15th century. This invention significantly facilitated the dissemination of manipulative or deceptive information. The primary advantage of the printing press was its speed. Over time, oral communication and the circulation of handwritten texts began to lose their dominance. As the printing press evolved and literacy rates improved across society, there was a marked increase in the effective dissemination of written fake news. Analogously, the impact of internet communication in the 21st century can be likened to the revolution brought about by the printing press.

The printing press not only enabled the distribution of texts but also propagated images containing misleading or entirely fabricated information. An illustrative example dates back to the 17th century, where an image depicting a snake-like monster purportedly being transported from Chile to France during an overseas expedition circulated widely. This demonstrates how visual disinformation, akin to contemporary memes and viral images, found its place alongside textual manipulation in historical contexts.

During the reign of George II (1727–1760) in Georgian England, false news played a significant role amidst various revolts, rebellions, and power struggles. There was a deliberate dissemination of disinformation regarding the king's health, particularly aimed at undermining his authority at the royal court. Dissidents managed to tarnish the king's public image through these false reports, highlighting how disinformation could be wielded to sway public opinion. Despite the unsuccessful outcome of the uprising, this period underscores the historical precedent of using disinformation as a tool to influence perceptions and destabilize authority.

Disinformation has historically served not only secular power struggles but also religious agendas, as exemplified by the Catholic Church's response to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. In the aftermath of this devastating natural disaster, Church officials attributed the earthquake to divine punishment for sinners. This manipulative interpretation led to the proliferation of fake news pamphlets in Portugal known as "relações de sucessos," which claimed miraculous survivals due to apparitions of the Virgin Mary. These religiously motivated narratives surrounding the earthquake prompted Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) to critique religious explanations of natural phenomena. Despite the Enlightenment and subsequent scientific advancements challenging such narratives, the role of disinformation persisted in shaping societal perceptions and beliefs.

The Industrial Revolution, Newspapers and the Spread of Disinformation

The social changes brought about by the industrial revolution, particularly the rise of modern journalism through newspaper publishing, introduced new dynamics into the realm of disinformation. Throughout the 19th century, there were numerous instances of fabricated reports aimed at harming specific groups or promoting fictional narratives for social manipulation. In the United States, for example, racist movements orchestrated campaigns that disseminated fake news alleging crimes

committed by African Americans in American society. This tactic of using false information to fuel social division was later exploited by the Nazi propaganda machine in the following century.

One of the most infamous examples of disinformation from this era is the Great Moon Hoax of 1835, published in the New York newspaper The Sun. This hoax involved a series of fabricated reports claiming the discovery of life on the moon, depicting various alien creatures and monsters inhabiting this celestial body. The Great Moon Hoax exemplifies how disinformation can captivate public imagination and shape perceptions, even in the early days of modern journalism.
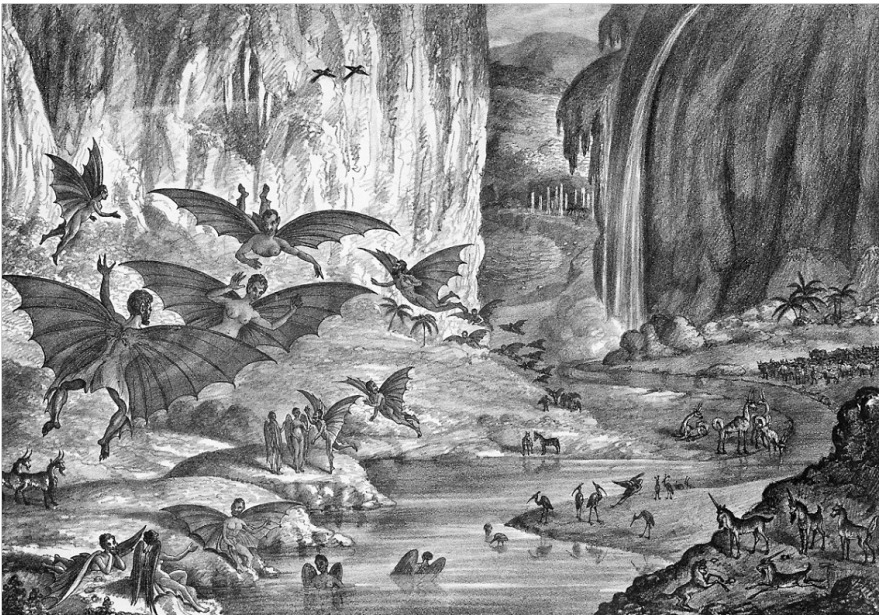
About life on the moon. The picture that appeared in the newspaper The Sun in 1835. Source: Wikipedia

According to the authors of the article, the famous astronomer John Herschel was credited with the discovery, which contributed significantly to the widespread belief in the information. This entirely fabricated tale gained immense popularity, causing newspaper sales to soar as readers clamoured to learn more about this astounding "discovery". Even today, similar situations arise where people mistake pre-constructed satire for genuine news and accept the story as fact.

Moving towards the end of the 19th century, we encounter other forms of disinformation associated with military conflicts. One notable example is the American-Spanish rivalry in the Caribbean. In 1898, the USS Maine sank in Cuba. Certain newspapers at the time pointed fingers at the Spanish, using dramatic illustrations of the explosion to persuade readers of their culpability. However, in reality, there was never any conclusive evidence to support the claim of Spanish involvement in the incident.

Around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a new wave of fabricated information surfaced in the form of British propaganda during the Boer Wars. Its objective was to perpetuate false stereotypes depicting the Boers as oppressors of British immigrants, characterized as violent, inhumane, and generally uncivilized. These stereotypes were predominantly disseminated by the British military to sway public opinion in Britain and justify the unpopular war.

Even Queen Victoria herself held negative views of the Boers, considering them to be harsh, cruel, and domineering people.

Manipulation of information extended its influence into the economic and financial realms as well. In 1803, amidst tensions between Britain and France, the Lord Mayor of London received a letter claiming that the conflict had been peacefully resolved. This news swiftly impacted the stock market, causing stocks to surge by 5%. However, suspicions arose regarding the authenticity of the letter, which were later confirmed to be justified—it was indeed a forgery.

Subsequently, the Ministry of Finance had to issue a statement to the press, clarifying the situation. Unfortunately, by the time the fraud was exposed, the shares had already changed hands, making it impossible to determine who had benefited from the deceitful letter.

Disinformation as a tool of modern propaganda of the 20th century

In the early 20th century, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion emerged in tsarist Russia, originating from earlier roots in France. This book stands as perhaps the most "successful" anti-Zionist work ever produced. It presented a fictional narrative outlining plans for global domination by an anonymous Jewish group. The authors shamelessly plagiarized several existing texts, notably borrowing from Maurice Joly's political satire, "Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu," published in 1864.

The Protocols fueled anti-Semitic sentiments initially in Russia and later spread globally over the ensuing decades. It is widely believed that the document was disseminated by the Czar's secret police to manipulate public opinion. This fabricated text served as the foundation for numerous conspiracy theories that persist to this day, with hundreds of thousands of far-right extremists and anti-Semites still clinging to its purported authenticity.

Tragically, the Nazis later exploited the Protocols to justify their heinous genocide of the Jewish people.

During the First World War, British propaganda aimed at vilifying the enemy focused heavily on demonizing the Germans. According to researchers Joachim Neander and Randal Marlin, in 1917, publications like The Times and The Daily Mail ran stories alleging that due to a shortage of fat in Germany caused by the British naval blockade, German forces were resorting to using the bodies of their own soldiers to produce fat and feed for pigs.

Interestingly, the impact of this disinformation wasn't fully realized until World War II. When reports of the Holocaust atrocities began to surface, some skeptics pointed to the disinformation spread during World War I. They argued that if similar grotesque claims about Germans using human remains had been fabricated in 1917, it cast doubt on the veracity of the reports of Nazi atrocities in the 1940s.

In the early 1920s, the Chekists in the USSR embarked on a campaign of disinformation aimed at undermining exiled opposition groups from the Tsarist regime. This marked the beginning of disinformation being wielded as a strategic tool within the Soviet secret police. They saw disinformation not only as a means to suppress opposition abroad but also to conduct influence operations in Western countries.

In the USSR, disinformation evolved into a structured discipline. The term was officially documented in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia in 1952, defining it as the deliberate spread of false news through media channels to deceive the public. Ironically, the Encyclopaedia asserted that such tactics were employed by the West against the Soviet Union, when in reality, the USSR was actively engaging in disinformation campaigns against its adversaries. This historical development highlights how disinformation became institutionalized and weaponized within the Soviet state apparatus, setting a precedent for its use as a tool of propaganda and psychological warfare during the Cold War era and beyond.

In 1933, the Nazi Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, led by Joseph Goebbels, recognized the power of disseminating fake news for manipulation. This office was dedicated to promoting Nazi ideology and fostering anti-Semitic sentiments through various cultural mediums like theatre and the press. However, its ultimate objective was to justify and legitimize the genocide of the Jewish population.

During the Cold War, a period marked by intense ideological rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, both sides engaged in extensive disinformation campaigns aimed at gaining political advantage. In the 1960s, Yuri Andropov, then-director of the KGB, underscored the strategic importance of disinformation. He famously compared it to cocaine, remarking that a small dose might not alter one's life, but habitual use could fundamentally change a person—turning them into an addict, much like the addictive nature of disinformation in political and psychological warfare.

During the Cold War, one of the most notorious examples of Soviet disinformation was the Denver operation, later known as Infection.

Orchestrated by the East German secret service Stasi in collaboration with the KGB, this disinformation campaign alleged that the HIV virus was engineered by the United States in a clandestine biological weapons lab at Fort Detrick. The narrative was propagated with the support of retired biophysicist Jakob Segal, who claimed in 1985, possibly under the influence of Stasi involvement, that HIV was created by combining elements of other retroviruses like VISNA and HTLV-1. Dubbed the "Segal Report," this disinformation gained traction globally, even finding its way into respected publications like the British newspaper Sunday Express, lending it an air of credibility.

Despite the campaign's initial success, much of the evidence linking Segal to the Stasi was lost when classified documents related to the Denver operation were largely destroyed in 1989–1990. Consequently, the extent of Segal's collaboration with the Stasi remains unclear. However, with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, this disinformation spread even further, taking on a life of its own in the digital realm.

According to researchers Douglas Selvage and Christopher Nehring, the Russian Federation's emerging intelligence services have revived and adapted old Soviet disinformation tactics. They point out that during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014, Russian propaganda channels repurposed disinformation strategies by replacing the HIV virus with Ebola. The new narrative alleged that the US, Great Britain, and the former apartheid regime in South Africa had collaborated to create Ebola as a biological weapon aimed at killing black Africans.

In addition to Cold War-era disinformation campaigns by major powers, similar tactics were also employed by states aligned with the Non-Aligned Movement, which rejected alignment with either the Western or Eastern blocs. An illustrative case comes from the Republic of South Africa in the 1970s, where the apartheid government orchestrated an elaborate, covert global propaganda and lobbying effort to garner international support for its discriminatory policies. Although initially uncovered by local investigative journalists in the late 1970s, this disinformation campaign persisted well into the early 1990s.

The rise of the information society and the fall of the iron curtain

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the conclusion of the bipolar confrontation, rather than witnessing a decline in disinformation, the 1990s saw a surge in national conflicts where disinformation became a weapon of choice. A stark example unfolded during the Bosnian War, particularly amidst the brutal siege of Srebrenica in 1994. At that time, a photograph circulated purportedly showing a Serbian orphan lying on his mother's grave, allegedly murdered by Bosnian Muslims.

Image from 1888 by Uroš Predič, known as an orphan at his mother's grave. Source: Wikipedia

This image was prominently featured in the Belgrade newspaper Večernje Novosti, lending credence to the disinformation narrative. However, it later emerged that the photograph was not taken during the 1990s conflict but was a historical image dating back to 1888, captured by Uroš Predić and known as "Orphan at his mother's grave." Despite the revelation of its true origin, by then, the disinformation had already taken root among Bosnian Serbs and continued to influence perceptions.

Another pivotal moment in history, akin to the invention of the printing press, was the explosive growth of the Internet at the turn of the millen-