Disinformation and its Impact on Canadian Society

By Kate Ciceri, CFUW Guelph, published over three editions of Guelph Line. Reprinted with permission.

Disinformation is defined as false information that is intentionally spread to mislead and manipulate, to deceive the public and/or to cause public harm. **Malinformation** refers to information based on truth but exaggerated or presented out of context. Malinformation is shared with the intent to attack an idea, individual or organization.

Disinformation has arguably existed in some form throughout history. However, in 2013, the World Economic Forum identified it as a trend to observe and by 2016 – only three years later – numerous journals and organizations engaged in research on the topic have identified disinformation as an existential threat to democracy, climate change, public health, and safety, and human rights.

Disinformation exploits emotionally charged topics. It triggers fear and anger, fueling distorted information systems, and validating, destructive beliefs and behaviors. It uses inflammatory language and distorts the truth. It feeds into confirmation bias, that is, our tendency to accept information that confirms pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Various forms of media further amplify the spread of disinformation and online repetition leads to validation of this false information. In 2021, statistics Canada, stated that 96% of Canadians saw information about the pandemic online that was false - 40% stated that they believed the false information and shared it with others. Only 20% of Canadians fact checked.

> *"Without facts, we don't have truth. Without truth, there is no trust. Without all three, you can't have democracy. This is why democracy is broken around the world."*
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> Maria Resser, Filipino and American journalist awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2021 speaking at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Hamburg in 2019.

The University of Cambridge offers an online misinformation susceptibility test. It's easy to take, and you are offered the option of allowing your response data to be used as part of an ongoing research project or not to be used in that manner. You should feel comfortable in making your own decision about the use of your response data. I think you'll find it interesting – we urge you to give it a try.

Here is the link https://yourmist.streamlit.app/

In order to understand both the process and power of disinformation it is essential to understand the concept of 'Otherization'. The process of 'othering' is categorizing people by ethnicity, belief systems, skin colour, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. It creates the belief in others as inferior and a threat - us versus them. It is a process that uses differences to destroy a sense of similarity and human connection. It sets the stage for prejudice and discrimination. It manipulates and creates political persecution. It reduces or displaces

empathy-creating extremist positions. The 'other' group becomes the enemy - less than human - and thus deserving of attack and destruction.

Research data from anthropological psychologists suggests that the evolutionary brain is wired to categorize. Early humans existing within small tribal groupings faced constant threats to survival. It was easier and safer to be suspicious of others. Humans became quick to attribute negative stereotypes to 'out' groups, this negative stereotype can even influence empathy – the essence of human goodness – to turn against human connection. 'Otherization' can intensify the empathy within the preferred group leading to violence against the 'other' seen as a threat.

Disinformation is a powerful force that feeds seeds of hate and fear. It leads to moral disengagement, creating a psychological distance from the suffering of the 'out' group. It leads to 'in' group favouritism and 'out' group dehumanization. It underscores our terrible history of atrocious crimes to humanity.

See: https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech

'Otherization' acts as a malign force within our society, fuelled by disinformation. We are not exempt from its influence. Our awareness of this threat and our individual determination to use our voice - no matter how quiet - is an active and effective tool. It is helpful to remind ourselves of our own power.

Social media is a key factor in the spread of disinformation. Social media platforms fuel disinformation that is created and driven by a host of online actors including Government state backed entities, extremists, and individuals. Disinformation is amplified online using trolls (individuals intentionally posting false and offensive, disruptive content) by bots (automated programs acting as humans), false identity accounts, paid accounts, and extremist influencers.

What we view on social media is determined by algorithms that control and direct content. The job of the algorithm is to keep the individual online – the longer one remains online, the more ads the platform sells. Algorithms that spread disinformation typically target users who post frequently and indiscriminately because social media platforms build in an addictive reward system. The platform rewards online postings with engagement in the form of likes, comments and re-shares. Social media algorithms dictate the content that appears in our social media feeds by using the social media data, network location, and the content the user has engaged with in the past. This allows the site to predict what information gains the users' attention. Users then engage with only a limited scope of content, not aware of broader resources or other factual information available that might clarify or deepen their knowledge. This in turn, creates an echo chamber in which smaller groups of participants share and re-share similar material.

Disinformation postings tend to be more novel, meaning they elicit strong emotion, such as fear, anger, surprise, or disgust. They grab attention and reinforce user responses and ongoing sharing. Social media platforms enable rapid sharing of this disinformation. These platforms are

financially incentivized. By publishing disinformation content, creators can earn income from social media through user views or 'clicks', self product promotion and partnering with other paying brands. The greater the following and engagement, the greater the earnings. Posts that contain disinformation receive higher levels of engagement and spread more rapidly and reach more users than truthful posts.

Social media tech owners have shown little commitment to content moderation and the removal of disinformation on their sites. Currently there is no process for fact-checking information or any attempt at blocking disinformation by Meta, X, YouTube and Google. Past attempts at self regulation have also proven inadequate. In 2020 Meta only labelled a limited number of Covid disinformation postings as false. Elon Musk, after his purchase of Twitter, gave only lip service to the concept of flagging disinformation published in postings and now frequently posts inflammatory disinformation on X himself. A 2024 study by Indiana University found that 0.25% of X users were responsible for up to 78% of tweets considered disinformation or low credibility. Such a statistically small number would suggest that strategies to regulate this disinformation could be easily utilized by X. Not only were these postings not flagged, but they were allowed to spread online. Some disinformation accounts were even verified because they paid for X's accreditation, which provided the illusion of legitimacy. Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Messenger, WhatsApp) employees, in the past, stated that the company was aware that disinformation on their platforms impacts society at a global level, but that it refused to initiate effective interventions.

Social media companies are powerful corporate entities with extensive resources. Historically they have circumvented consequences for unethical practice. In 2023 Meta's annual revenue was USD 134 billion. Meta consistently has responded to criticism and complaints with apologies but no action. Canadians are familiar with Meta's attitude towards profit. When the Canadian government requested that Meta compensate for using news articles from Canadian news sources by paying a relatively small fee compared to its annual income, Meta blocked all Canadian news on its site. As a result, Canadian Facebook has been flooded with disinformation without any ethical Canadian news articles to balance the false information that is so pervasively posted. Currently social media giants are using their financial influence with the American government to initiate sanctions attacking European countries that have social media regulations and those individuals that support such regulations.

Social media technology does not optimize accurate, verified information. The goal is to incentivize engagement, encouraging, outrageous, destructive, and blatantly false information to circulate endlessly, fuelling defensiveness, fear, and rage, threatening the very fabric of our society. Ultimately, though, the challenge lies with us. However, we may personally use social media sites such as Facebook, it is important that we face the responsibility, that in fact – through that use – we are supporting those sites and the damage they create. What we do with this recognition is an individual choice – but again it is important never to forget that we do have a voice – we can take action and that together we have the power to make a difference.