

The Disinformation Wars: An Epistemological, Political, and Socio-Historical Interrogation

Helena Sheehan

What really is going on in the current mobilisation against disinformation? Whose interests are being served by it? Could it be that those forces portraying themselves as bulwarks against disinformation are actually the most insidious purveyors of disinformation? Does the focus on disinformation conceal the real deceit?

The current wave of interest in disinformation is predicated on a perceived decline in truthfulness,

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even blatant deception, in public discourse—sometimes called post-truth society. Disinformation studies has emerged in academe as a subdiscipline offering big research funding and fast-track career progression.¹ There are many powerful players pushing this agenda.²

I do think that public discourse is full of deceit and self-deception and that there has been a definite rise in this. But the dominant discourse surrounding disinformation and disinformation studies is oblivious to the historical presence of this deception as well as the present pervasiveness of it. Such studies typically focus on social media rather than mainstream media as the source of the problem, but I want to focus on mainstream media as a source.



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¹ ↪ There is a proliferation of literature in disinformation studies in recent years. A book articulating the typical themes and arguments is Eileen Culloty and Jane Suiter, *Disinformation and Manipulation in Digital Media: Information Pathologies* (London: Routledge, 2021).

² ↪ In “Bad News: Selling the Story of Disinformation,” Joseph Bernstein outlines the corporate, academic and governmental forces driving the “Big Disinfo” agenda. Joseph Bernstein, “Bad News: Selling the Story of Disinformation,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2021.

Moreover, I think that the emphasis on information and disinformation, on facts and fact-checking, good and bad actors, is quite shallow and misses the more insidious levels of deceit and self-deception in our public discourse.

Yes, it is all so blatant with Fox News, with Donald Trump and QAnon, but looking back I see the problem with NBC, ABC, CBS, and every president before and after Trump.³ Here in Ireland, I see the problem with Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE), most Irish newspapers, most parties in Dáil Éireann, and most academics here and abroad more than with our far right, who have been taking to the streets and social media against public health measures and rising levels of migration. My problem is not only with what the liberal consensus decries as fake news, it is with what the liberal consensus considers non-fake news. The far right and the dark web are easy targets for mainstream academics who are too myopic or too cowardly to take on mainstream media.

Also, I think that the field of disinformation studies represents a regression in media studies. In the early days of media studies, most of us in this field came from other disciplines—in my case, philosophy, for others, sociology, literature, politics, economics, and so on. We brought these other disciplines to bear, as well as broader perspectives and deeper insights on the themes we addressed. Of course, there were also plodding positivist studies doing content analysis and effects research based on crude conceptualisations. The old hypodermic needle model is resurfacing in disinformation theory, insofar as there is anything in the way of theory there. There were different theoretical approaches to media studies, but when this was articulated, it sometimes yielded provocative clashes of contending paradigms, something I have not seen in a long time.

Sometimes, at media studies events in recent years, it is as if previous decades of media studies had not happened, even as if centuries of intellectual history had not happened. Bringing to it my own primary field of philosophy, I believe that it matters that so many in media studies and journalism are oblivious to developments in epistemology and philosophy of science. A whole generation seems to know nothing of decades of debate about positivism, neopositivism, and postpositivism, in which it has become clear that a fact is not such a simple thing as they seem to believe it is, making the current emphasis on facts and fact-checking seem somewhat simpleminded.

The *Irish Times* declares “Facts have no agenda.”⁴ Wrong. Facts never come without contexts, without values, without underlying assumptions, without ideologies, without agendas. This is epistemology 101—not a course offered these days, it seems.

In whose interest is this unexamined assumption of the existence of value-free facts? It is in the interest of the system that conceals the nature of itself as a system. It is a debased positivism that prevails in disinformation studies and indeed in most social sciences. It is not even decent positivism. It is not even conscious of itself as positivism. Early positivism was motivated by a drive to cleanse knowledge, to formulate clear demarcation criteria, to be able to differentiate between valid and invalid truth claims. It faltered because its criteria were too narrow, not because criteria were not necessary.

³ ↪ Although the U.S. networks were never the bastions of objectivity they claimed to be, corporate control has intensified over recent decades. Robert McChesney and John Nichols have argued that this has led to such a hollowing out of journalism that state subsidies are necessary in *The Death and Life of American Journalism* (New York: Nations Books, 2010).

⁴ ↪ “The Irish Times ‘Real News’ Campaign,” Newsbrands Ireland, newsbrandsireland.ie.

We need to ask: What stories are being told? How are they being told? Why? What stories are not being told? Why not?

Most of today's academics have never established what truth criteria animate their scholarship. There are very few who have worked out their basic worldviews, so their research is unmoored. There is no core to it. There is a hollowness in whatever they produce.

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While I do believe that fact-checking has a role to play, it does not address the real deceptions and delusions of mainstream news and current affairs and the academic analysis of them. What we must examine and expose are the underlying assumptions, the worldviews, the ideological positions

structuring the taken-for-granted news agendas and news values. We need to ask: What stories are being told? How are they being told? Why? What stories are not being told? Why not?

Unarticulated, often unconscious, worldviews structure the unquestioned choices about news agendas. A pretend

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neutrality masks significant ideological positions that coincide with those of the masters of the universe and with the interests of the all-powerful markets. Journalists and media academics proceed with naïve notions of decontextualised information and depoliticised facts, thus concealing the realities of power and the nature of

the system structuring what information is propagated and what counts as facts.

I attended a book launch where Joe Duffy, RTE presenter, proclaimed that the answer to the problem of fake news is "trusted brands." RTE, academic studies have confirmed, is Ireland's most trusted news source.⁵ But is it really trustworthy? No. Every single day I confront a news agenda that is skewed to the interests, to the ideological position, of those in power, not only nationally but globally.

There is a structural issue here and it is necessary to look at the trajectory of capital to explain the trajectory of journalism. Even in the heyday of professional journalism, it was never neutral, let alone "objective." In the United States, the hollowing out of journalism has been attributed to corporate control. In Europe, public service broadcasting, while not under direct corporate control, nevertheless is dominated by the interests and values of global capital. Because RTE is public service broadcasting, it is the news source we are entitled to hold to the highest standards. They make strong claims about their professional journalism and pose as the bulwark against Fox News and right- and left-wing views on social media.

There are problems with RTE on many levels. Sometimes, it is indeed "fake news" reports that are factually incorrect. For example, a somewhat violent demonstration against public health restrictions was reported as being from the far right and far left. This was despite the position of the left on the whole being for stricter public health restrictions. After a Twitter storm, in which I participated, RTE and the Garda commissioner reluctantly retracted that allegation. In reporting on events in Bucha, Zaporizhzhia, and Mariupol, as well as at the Nord Stream pipeline, where there are plausible counternarratives in play, RTE has reported implausible versions because they were propagated by more powerful sources.

⁵ ↪ Sinéad Crowley, "[Trust in News Media Increased over Past Year, Report Finds](#)," RTE, June 23, 2021.

Sometimes, RTE proceeds by omission. There are so often many levels of omission, but I will give a simple example. Night after night, RTE covered Volodymyr Zelensky's addresses to every national parliament, including our own, where our parliamentarians fawned on him unreservedly, except for a few who did not stand, but RTE uttered not one word about what happened in the Greek parliament and then in the Cypriot parliament the next day, where it did not go so well. All afternoon, I tweeted to RTE asking if they were going to cover that story. They did not.

RTE reports and analyses the war in Ukraine according to the position of the United States, the European Union, NATO, and the government of Ukraine. When did we hear one voice articulating the position of those in the east and south of that country alienated from post-2014 Ukraine? Or those who might tell of suppression of media, trade unions, and left parties there? Or those who might tell of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and deaths of those who do not toe the line there? Or anyone who analysed how the United States has manipulated events there, especially since 2014, and now suppresses any movement toward negotiations? As millions of people there and throughout the world live with war casualties, refugee crises, economic impoverishment, ecological destruction, and nuclear fear as a result of this war, who is examining whose interests it is serving, not only in Russia but in Ukraine and the United States? What are the epistemological and ethical criteria involved in designating Trump and Vladimir Putin as bad actors but not Joe Biden and Zelensky? If I were to use such crude categories, I would designate them all as bad actors.

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However, that does not get to the core of what is at stake. The basic problem is the absence of analysis of the deeper historical forces structuring the flow of facts and events. They fail to do this every day on the Russia-Ukraine war and so many other stories.

In RTE's reporting on the death of the queen on the neighbouring island and other matters relating to royalty, they fawn, they act as if Ireland were not a republic, they speak without the slightest hint of a question about the legitimacy of monarchy, of the expropriation of common wealth, or of the violence and injustice underlying their wealth, power, and privilege.

They use as if unproblematic terms such as the West, the free world, the leader of the free world, the international community, democratic nations. They take for granted that it is the United States, and not the United Nations, who should lead the response, and indeed lay down the law, for whatever disputes arise in the world. They take a benign view of NATO and its role in pursuing full-spectrum U.S. domination.

Even where RTE might seem less controversial, where they seem to be doing a good job of public service broadcasting, they might do so on one level, but fail at deeper levels. Take COVID-19. Yes, they gave necessary public health information, but they endlessly repeated the same information: the numbers of cases, hospitalisations, and vaccinations. They also failed to address the systemic causes of the pandemic, such as the whole capitalist system of agriculture and a lack of investment in public health infrastructure, which are still there and may yet result in future, fiercer pandemics. They wasted every interview with Mike Ryan of the World Health Organization, who has a good grasp of the geopolitical dimensions of public health, and asked him only the questions where he would be reiterating what local experts were saying.

On environmental matters, they deal with them only sporadically and superficially. There was a big focus on climate change during COP26 and COP27; the next week, there was nothing. It was as if the problem disappeared. They never evoke the real scale of the ecological crisis facing us. They probe even less the systemic causes of ecological crisis or what it might take to reverse the worst of the crisis, because this might lead to querying the capitalist mode of production.

There are so many more examples I could give of how RTE fails to produce truthful news and insightful analysis in its huge role in shaping our public discourse. Importantly, RTE is very far from the worst of mainstream media in the world. Where are academics in addressing the real problems with the mainstream news agenda? Disinformation studies tend to assume that disinformation is a mysterious toxin infecting an otherwise healthy media ecosystem. Because this is not the case, their proposed solutions fail to get at the real issues. Their well-funded fact-checking schemes, where social scientists team up with computer scientists, will continue to arrive at conclusions confirming the liberal consensus, which remains unexamined. Their emphasis on platform governance is grounded in the liberal elite panic at the social media giving access to a range of voices and views that are beyond their control. It is very problematic for this elite and those platforms to be the arbiters of what is legitimate public discourse. Their proposals on media literacy might seem a good idea, but not if such efforts are grounded in the same liberal assumptions going unquestioned.

Some disinformation studies do rise above this and go wider. There is a publicly accessible syllabus for critical disinformation studies at University of North Carolina taking an approach that is grounded in history, culture, and politics, and raises questions of power and inequality.⁶ An article by Joseph Bernstein in Harper's Magazine exposing the underlying assumptions and power relations of "Big Disinfo" is an important counterbalance to mainstream disinformation studies. He notes that it is easier to focus on adjustable algorithms than entrenched social conditions.⁷

Also of value is a 2020 Jack Bratich article arguing that the anti-disinformation industry constitutes a war of restoration to counter the erosion of U.S. global hegemony and the loss of credibility suffered by the political center.⁸

Critical disinformation studies can make a contribution to media studies and media literacy, but I think that only excavation of hidden ideologies will get at the core of the deceptions structuring so much of our public discourse. Without that, journalists will be only stenographers of the surface and academics will be only puppets of the powerful.

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⁶ ↪ Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life, "Critical Disinformation Studies," citap.unc.edu.

⁷ ↪ Bernstein, "Bad News."

⁸ ↪ Jack Bratich, "Civil Society Must Be Defended: Misinformation, Moral Panics, and Wars of Restoration," *Communication, Culture, and Critique* (2020): 1–22.

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