Ten Lessons for the Age of Disinformation

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the structure and content of a course devoted to developing strategies to cope with the massive assault of disinformation on American democracy. *Ten Lessons for the Age of Disinformation* will provide pedagogical techniques to teach high school, college, and extended learning students how to cope with our current environment, which the author calls the Age of Disinformation. It provides a multifaceted approach in which each facet reinforces the others. The ten lessons are: (1) characteristics of the Age of Disinformation; (2) the varieties of false information; (3) knowledge, opinion, and second-hand knowledge; (4) deception and self-deception; (5) psychological factors; (6) cognitive authorities; (7) logical fallacies; (8) ethical principles; (9) social media; and (10) enhanced information literacy. Each lesson outlines the key ideas for each lesson and provides exercises that can be completed in groups or by oneself and that reinforces the key ideas of each lesson.

Target Audiences: high school and college students, community learning groups (e.g., library literacy programs), civics classes

Keywords: Disinformation, Deception, Self-deception, Cognitive Authority, Disinformation Psychology, Age of Disinformation, Ethical Principles, Information Literacy, Varieties of False Information, Lessons

It is essential to develop pedagogical techniques to teach students to preserve their understanding of truth in the Age of Disinformation. To be effective, teachers must take a multifaceted approach, each facet of which reinforces the other. A course or workbook to cope with the Age of Disinformation would involve ten different lessons: (1) characteristics of the Age of Disinformation; (2) the varieties of false information; (3) knowledge, opinion and second-hand knowledge; (4) deception and self-deception in disinformation; (5) psychological factors; (6) cognitive authorities; (7) logical fallacies; (8) ethical principles; (9) social media; and (10) enhanced information literacy. Each lesson is accompanied by exercises.

Lesson 1: Characteristics of the Age of Disinformation.

Key ideas:

- While disinformation has always been around, we are now engaged in a global wars of honest information challenged by the varieties of false information, what is called the InfoWars.
- The Internet, self-publishing, and online trolls have dramatically increased the level and breadth and speed of disinformation.
- The InfoWars between truthful information and disinformation are not balanced. The notion that they are balanced represents the notion of false equivalence. While there may be two sides to every story, each side is not equally supported or grounded.
- The side of disinformation insists on invalidating every opinion but its own.

As long as there have been human beings, there has been disinformation. Disinformation is false information with the intent to deceive, whether personally, socially, or politically. What has changed is its pervasiveness, speed, and the extent and variety of communication channels available to spread it. The Age of Disinformation has at least two dimensions: (1) the perpetuation of disinformation as a
political strategy through all forms of media; and (2) the attack on reliable information, based on facts, reason, and evidence, intensified by the political structure which asserts if the current political establishment does not agree with it, it is therefore “fake news.” The disinfomed are not merely disinfomed; they often assert that only their “information” is true and contrary views must be rejected.

The Age of Disinformation is to some degree the Age of the Anti-Enlightenment. The Enlightenment advanced the notion that knowledge is gained systematically and through careful observation of the environment. It promoted ideals of individual liberty, constitutional government, separation of church and state, and religious tolerance. Now anti-science agendas, such as those that deny the value of vaccinations or the reality of climate change, and anti-humanitarian propaganda, such as the criminality of immigrant, transmits disinformation through cable broadcasting and social media. This is not to say that the Enlightenment has been an unmitigated good. For example, the notion of a universal reason that applies the equally to all men, women and cultures and the radicalization of individual liberty are problematic. Sr. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, describes the Enlightenment as increasingly favoring radical individualism and denigrating the common good (Landers, 2018). However, it is a travesty to discard reason in favor of a pseudo-rationality or tribal beliefs. Evidence and facts matter.

A case in point: while many vaccine deniers are sincerely concerned about the welfare of their children about the supposed risks of vaccination, they fail to find a shred of scientific evidence for their views, except for supposed colloquial evidence spread by those misinformed about science or trolls intent on sowing discord in our democracy. What is new in the Age of Disinformation is that anyone who believes anything can find support for it, no matter how ignorant or wrong, whether a conspiracy theory, the flat-earth society, white supremacy, or aliens visiting earth. Google indifferently supplies both information and disinformation.

There is a war at hand, a war of information versus forms of false information. While Alex Jones peddles disinformation of the vilest sort, the title of his program, InfoWars, correctly indicates a global problem. The war of false information against real information is not only for the health of America’s democracy but also is a threat to all democracies throughout the world. The author calls it a World War because it is quite global; throughout the world the Internet is inflaming discord in many democracies, elevating autocrats and fascists. Its insult to freedom lies not only in what is spread on the Internet but also what it suppresses and challenges. In countries around the world there is a battle to continue to anchor political decision making in science, reason, evidence, fact, democratic values, and humanism. The Age of Disinformation is one in which misinformation, lies, and obfuscation do war against the evidence and truth, and power and greed seek simplistic solutions to complex problems.

The notion of false equivalences asserts that for any issue, there are two equally valid opinions. But in the Age of Disinformation this no longer holds. The sides in the war are not balanced, for the one side not only spreads disinformation but actively challenges, abuses, and attacks those who are committed to truth, evidence, facts and logic. Climate change denial is a case in point. It suggests that those who believe in the vast scientific consensus have no valid grounds for their believes. In a supreme example of false equivalences, all opinions are equal but the one opinion outweighs and trumps all others. Not all opinions are equally informed or justified. Some opinions are formed from false information and such opinions do not have the same standing as ones that are well-formed: that is, based on rational arguments, evidence, and logic. To insist that they are equivalent is a mistake in reasoning. The author will look at this issue further in later lessons.
Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

1. How do you describe your political viewpoint, if any? Conservative or liberal? If one of these, find information on one of your pet peeves on the side with which you do not agree, and decide whether your pet peeve is justified or whether your understanding is limited. If you believe that you are apolitical or not engaged in politics, explore the soundness of any pet peeve you may have on any subject matter.

2. On what media do you rely? What bias does it represent? To what extent is the bias known?

3. How do you respond to the claim that you cannot remain neutral in the InfoWars? Doing nothing is the same as supporting the destruction of American constitutional democracy and, ultimately, the destruction of habitability on the planet.

4. Describe six characteristics of fake news or disinformation. Supply examples that exemplify one or more of those characteristics, explaining why.

Lesson 2: The varieties of false information.

Key ideas:

1. There are a variety of forms of false information and ignorance on the Internet and we must distinguish among them: lies per se, ignorance per se, misinformation, paltering, disinformation, and missing information, with particular focus on two forms of information deceit, doxing and fake news.

2. The key characteristic of disinformation is the intent to deceive, whether in doxing, fake news, or other instances of disinformation.

There are a variety of forms of ignorance or false information available on various media, particularly on the Internet:

- Lies per se: While in earlier ages we might expect lies to gain no traction (with some exceptions, e.g., Bill Clinton’s “I did not have sex with that woman”), one of Trump’s achievements is to make the lie a hallmark of his leadership style. Some of his supporters and supporting media may be convinced about or are indifferent to those lies because they believe that he represents some of their core grievances. According to those counting the number of lies he has uttered, it surpassed 10,000 in his first couple of years in office (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2019).

- Ignorance per se: Lacking knowledge or awareness, being uninformed about a specific subject or fact. Unfortunately, Donald Trump provides another strong example: his lack of knowledge of the Constitution and how it forms the nature of our democracy, how government works, the separation of powers, or the role of the first amendment seem to elude his understanding.

- Disinformation: Supplying misinformation or lies with the deliberate aim to mislead. The promoters of such untruths can include foreign governments, government agencies, corporations, or political parties, movements or candidates. Fallis (2014) distinguishes lies from “true disinformation.” When President Bill Clinton asserted that “he did not have sex with” Monica Lewinsky, he was arguably not lying, as they had not had sexual intercourse, but he was unquestionably misleading. True disinformation is related to paltering and doxing, because accurate information is supplied but not completely.
• Misinformation: Providing information that is incorrect or inaccurate. The difference between misinformation and disinformation is that the former does not have the intent to deceive. Misinformation may be just a mistake, such getting the time of a movie wrong.

• Missing Information: Omitted information that makes it impossible to understand facts and make decisions. Its absence may be due to negligence, incompetence, or the desire to mislead; if it comes from a desire to mislead it is disinformation. For example, after many mass shootings, the National Rifle Association and its supporters spread a meme stating that in Switzerland 1 person in 2 has guns and it has the lowest crime rate in the world. They fail to mention that Switzerland has a mandatory military service for all able-bodied persons (e.g., men and women), that training in gun use is mandatory for all gun owners, and that it has a strong culture of gun responsibility and safety that is anchored in society and passed from generation to generation (Brueck, 2018).

• Paltering: An attempt to mislead by telling the truth, but not the whole truth. If your mother asks you whether you have finished your yardwork and you reply that you were working on mowing the grass, this may be accurate but if you are also supposed to weed the garden you are paltering. Paltering is related to missing or omitted information, but it is a common ploy of politicians so that it deserves its own category. When Trump asserted that there had been zero admission of guilt in a 1973 federal lawsuit that charged his family’s firm with housing discrimination, he was telling the literal truth, but he did so in order to falsely suggest that there was no legal recognition that Trump Corporation had committed housing discrimination, in spite of the fact that the conclusion of the suit included stipulations to desegregate Trump properties (McGregor, 2016).

• Doxing: searching for and publishing private or identifying information about an individual or group on the Internet, typically with malicious intent, such as shaming, extortion, coercion, or harassment. A particular form of disinformation, doxing is related to “true disinformation” (Fallis, 2014). The term comes from a variation in the spelling of the abbreviation "docs" (for "documents") and according to Wikipedia refers to "compiling and releasing a dossier of personal information on someone" (Doxing, 2019). For example, during the presidential election, Russian hackers targeted Democratic candidates and the Democratic National Committee headquarters by doxing those candidates and the Party. Hilary Clinton may have already had weaknesses as a candidate but they were compounded by recurrent issues with her private email server and the statements by former FBI director James Comey. However, most Clinton supporters and the intelligence communities believed that the Russian assault of doxing and disinformation campaigns that played a fundamental role in her electoral defeat.

• Fake news: Another common form of disinformation, a type of “yellow journalism” (news stories with catchy headlines but with little or no factual basis) that consists of deliberate disinformation, hoaxes or fraudulent stories, spread in traditional media, cable news, or online social media. A national poll delineated the meaning of fake news for most Americans: “Just 25% say the term ‘fake news’ applies only to stories where the facts are wrong. Most Americans (65%), on the other hand, say that ‘fake news’ also applies to how news outlets make editorial decisions about what they choose to report” (National..., 2018). This lesson accepts the majority position. Fake news may differ from ordinary disinformation, in that its purveyors posit
a narrative, such as a conspiracy theory or a meme, which Richard Dawkins originally defined in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as “a unit of cultural transmission” (Chapter 11). A meme is a concept or behavior that spreads quickly from person to person that includes beliefs, fashions, stories, and phrases. Fake news is published with the intent to distort or “mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically” (Fake news, 2019). A recent fake news story or meme claims that refugees in the United States get three times more money in federal government assistance than Social Security beneficiaries (Debunking False Stories Archives, 2019). This is false. However, Trump’s notion of fake news is any assertion or opinion from whatever source with which he disagrees, which is the opposite of what real fake news is.

This taxonomy of the varieties of false information may not be complete, but it covers most cases available in current media.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following question:

(1) Of the eight varieties of false information given above, can you find different, specific examples of 6 of them? In each case, provide the example, provide its source (e.g., link URL), and why it illustrates the specific category well. Be aware that many examples may illustrate more than one category, in which case discuss how a particular case manifests different forms of false information or ignorance.

Lesson 3: Knowledge, opinion, and second-hand knowledge.

Key ideas:

(1) We must distinguish between opinion and knowledge, between what we can know for sure (or to do the research or education or have the experience to have such knowledge) and opinions that may or may not be converted into knowledge.

(2) Because we do not and cannot have knowledge about everything, we rely on second-hand knowledge that we acquire from others.

(3) This second-hand knowledge is derived from cognitive authorities. This “knowledge” really exists as opinion in consumer’s minds with varying degrees of certainty to the degree that we “trust and believe” our cognitive authorities.

(4) Persons, news institutions, or social media can act as cognitive authorities, whether genuine or false.

(5) These authorities can be genuine or false, the paradox being that one can have high certainty about their cognitive authorities and yet it is misplaced.

(6) These opinions (to us as we hear or see them, though not to the cognitive authority) can be can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if one can do or does the research to verify it; false, if after research, it cannot be established as true or as a matter of preference; a matter of taste, if based on one’s preferences.

(7) Consumers may assume that their opinions are knowledge.

We need to consider the distinction between knowledge and opinion. Plato characterized knowledge as “justified true belief” (i.e., one can supply a rationale for what one knows, based on reason and evidence or facts). Wikipedia offers a relatively straightforward approach: “Knowledge is a familiarity,
awareness, or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering, or learning” (Knowledge, 2019). It is a cognitive state by which we understand something as the result of our experience, education, or cognitive processing. There are tons of knowledge in books, such as scientific knowledge, but this knowledge is latent to us until we each do the work of converting and processing the signs, symbols, and meaning of the texts and acquiring the appropriate experiences into knowledge. Knowledge has a quality of certitude, perhaps not immediately, but after a deliberative process.

While contrary to common notions about opinion, the author is expanding on the notion of opinion by arguing that opinions come in various types: true opinions; opinions that are preferences, being neither true or false; and false opinions. The author does so because one hears various kinds of information from, for example, one’s preferred news sources. The kinds of information that one hears do not exist as knowledge in one person as most news consumers, save for those who have amassed a certain level of knowledge on a particular matter, though they could be matters of confirmation bias as well. We will discuss these exceptions later [as well as the occasions where one feels warranted to accept second-hand knowledge without needing to pursue its actual truth]. They are opinions or at best what is called second-hand knowledge (see below). “True opinion” is opinion that could be turned into knowledge, through education or research such as seeking evidence from reliable sources. If one did not know that the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the square root of the sum of its sides squared, one can take a course in geometry to learn it. If one believes that Pizzagate is a fake news story, one can do the research using reliable sources for confirmation. If I think that Adele is a better singer than Lady Gaga, that may be true for me and never for you. Matters of taste, for which one can make arguments, are never true per se. They are matters of opinion that will vary among individuals or groups, despite the fact that one can advance arguments for why one would prefer one over the other. There are “false opinions,” e.g. climate change denial, which cannot be converted into truth. Thus the author wants to distinguish among opinions that can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if one does the research to verify it; false, if after research, it cannot be established as true or as a matter of preference; a matter of taste, if based on one’s preferences. For example, at a July, 2019 re-election rally, Trump made the following claims: that there was not an empty seat at this event or other Trump events; that Ilhan Omar praised al Qaeda and terrorism; that patients with preexisting conditions were protected more by Republicans than Democrats; that Hispanics have low employment, because they want a strong border wall; that in the ninth Congressional District, the liberal Dan McCready wants to take away Americans’ guns, wants to raise taxes, and likes socialism and open borders (Dale & Subramaniam, 2019). These are false opinions, despite his supporters’ embrace of or indifference to them. Interestingly, Plato also proposed a category of “imagining,” a cognitive state inferior to the category of opinion (or in my extrapolation, false opinion). This cognitive state involves taking on a distorted perception of the sensible world. Conspiracy theorists often have such distorted perceptions: e.g., QAnon theorists assert such notions that John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr. is alive and well and working with Trump (Dickson, 2019).

Patrick Wilson explored the construction of knowledge in Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority (1983). He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways: (1) based on our experience; and (2) from or through others. Since our experience is limited, we must rely at times on second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others. These others may exist on a spectrum from very knowledgeable to outright liars. Cognitive authority is a phrase that Wilson coined to explain our understanding of others as being authorities. A cognitive
authority must have both credibility and trustworthiness. We will explore how cognitive authority occurs both for real news and fake news, and how second-hand knowledge can be confused or embraced as first-hand knowledge or, more correctly, unwarranted opinion.

It is clear that we need cognitive authorities. If we had to prove everything that we know, we would be paralyzed from making any progress in our lives. It seems probable that Trump’s followers see Trump himself and Fox News and other ultra-right figures and associations as cognitive authorities. Similarly, liberals may embrace MSNBC as their cognitive authorities. Are these cognitive authorities genuine? Do they have the properties and characteristics that we associate with real cognitive authorities? Or are they something that we might call pseudo-cognitive authorities or false cognitive authorities? If so, how do we distinguish among these cognitive authorities? This issue will be explored further in Lesson 6.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

1. What in your experience do you count as genuine knowledge?
2. Can you think of any opinions that you have that could be turned into knowledge? How? For example, if you believe that Pizzagate is a fake news story, you can do the research using reliable sources to show this is a case of fake news.
3. Can you think of false opinions that you may remember? How did you go about determining that they were false, and not a matter of opinions of preference?
4. Name some of your personal authorities. On which subjects do you trust each of them? How do you justify your trust in them?
5. Who or what are your media cognitive authorities (e.g., newspaper, television channel, or social media site)? Do they exhibit a bias? Do you think that you use them to bolster your view (as confirmation bias)?
6. Who or what are examples of false cognitive authorities? On what grounds can you assert that they are false?

Lesson 4: Deception and self-deception.

Key ideas:

1. Self-deception is a way in which we can embrace any of the forms of ignorance or false information.
2. Self-deception is a way in which we can maintain our beliefs while ignoring or avoiding contravening evidence. Von Hippel and Robert Trivers describe five varieties of self-deception: (a) biased information search; (b) biased interpretation; (c) misremembering; (d) rationalization; and (e) convincing oneself that a lie is true.
3. Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs as we convince others, and vice versa. This is social self-deception.
4. There are two cases each of social self-deception which have two aspects, positive and negative: (a) situating (i) positive – by seeking like-minded people and (ii) negative – by avoiding people who disagree; and (b) persuasive (i) positive such as by trying to convince people to be like-minded or (ii) negative – such as by withholding information that would deter a person from becoming like-minded.
The difference between disinformation and other forms of false information or ignorance is the intent to deceive. However, deception often involves self-deception. Sartre set self-deception, which he also called bad faith, as a key to understanding how people live inauthentically: holding or living a contradiction at the one and same time, that is believing what you don’t believe, such as believing that your vote does not matter, while recognizing the slim margin by which Trump won the electoral college. In bad faith people may deceive themselves into thinking that they do not have the freedom to make choices for fear of the potential consequences, i.e., that they would have to be responsible for themselves. We might file forms of "willful ignorance" under this category, knowing something but consciously or unconsciously ignoring it, e.g., choosing to believe that the Confederate flag or statues of Confederate leaders are not symbols of racism.

Self-deception is an important way in which we embrace false information, whether misinformation, disinformation, missing information, incomplete information, or even true information used in paltering, though it seems rampant in disinformation. There are two types: motivated and unmotivated. In motivated self-deception, we push a form of self-deception for conscious political, social, ethical or personal gain (e.g., proposing that all Muslims believe in Sharia Law and support jihad). Stephen Colbert’s notion of “truthiness” is probably the best contemporary expression of motivated self-deception. Wikipedia described it as a “belief or assertion that a particular statement is true based on the intuition or perceptions of some individual or individuals, without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts” (Truthiness, 2019). We practice truthiness when there is some belief we want to be true despite clear evidence to the contrary. Truthiness is common among Trump supporters who cannot find any fault in or ignore Trump’s lies or behavior. Unmotivated self-deception involves succumbing to one’s biases, motivated to the degree that it accords with one’s a priori biases; in other words, we seek information that confirms our a priori beliefs, which is precisely known as confirmation bias. Many people are inclined to information avoidance as one technique of confirmation bias, that is, avoid any information or sources that contradict what one wants to believe, e.g., that Trump is a great leader or that MSNBC is a flawless critic of the Trump administration.

Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) describe five varieties of self-deception: They are (1) biased information search; (2) biased interpretation; (3) misremembering; (4) rationalization; and (5) convincing oneself that a lie is true. With respect to the first variety, the information seeker avoids information by limiting his/her exposure, holding onto a partial truth, rather than confronting the whole truth. When Trump supporters hear a negative report about Trump, such as that he paid money to women with whom he had affairs before the election, they restrict their listening to Fox News or to blogs, social media, or friends who support the same views.

Biased interpretation occurs when attitudes stay the same in the face of new, contradictory facts. Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) cite the case of two groups of people with strong, differing attitudes toward capital punishment. They were each presented with some evidence that suggested capital punishment was a deterrent of crime and with evidence that it was not. Both groups remained polarized in their opinion (p. 9). There are many such issues for Trump supporters and Trump critics: the success of the talks with North Korea about denuclearization; the renegotiated free trade agreement (USMCA – formerly NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada; the success of his tariffs on foreign-made products, such as steel and aluminum; and the benefits of the new tax law. Each set of persons focus on the evidence that backs their original opinion.
The third self-deceptive strategy Von Hippel and Trivers (2011) describe is misremembering, forgetting. This can happen when new information is inconsistent with one’s preferences. (p. 9). The obvious example is all the Trump supporters who voted for and appreciated the presidency of Barack Obama who subsequently have been converted into despisers of his programs and the legislation that benefitted them: e.g., healthcare programs maligned as, in the eyes of his detractors, Obamacare.

Rationalization occurs, according to Von Hippel and Trivers (2011), when one “avoid[s] telling oneself the whole truth by reconstructing or rationalizing the motives behind the original behavior to make it socially more acceptable” (p. 9). One can imagine a Trump supporter who assert referring to non-white Congresswomen that “to go back to your country” is not a racist comment.

Finally, convincing oneself that a lie is true, is rampant in the current political environment dominated by Trump and his administration, enabled by the GOP and Fox News. Perhaps the most outrageous example was when Trump at a rally on July 24, 2018, proclaimed that “Just remember: what you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening” (Holmes, 2018). The irony is that this is precisely what Trump supporters should be thinking about the things Trump says. But it should not be that surprising that, as the title and content of a psychological study assert, “Self-deceived individuals are better at deceiving others” (Lamba & Notyananda, 2014). Trump is an excellent example of a self-deceived individual, as he claims to be the one person who can fix monumental national and international problems. Another good example is that of Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s lawyer who asserted that “truth isn’t truth” (Morin & Cohen, 2018) on the television program, “Meet the Press,” when explaining why Trump should not have testified before special counsel Robert Mueller for fear of perjury if he were caught in a lie.

Self-deception is not only a learned behavior but a socialized and socializing one as well. Roy Dings (2017), in a paper on “Social strategies in self-deception,” claims that self-deception can be “a process that is distributed across the social context of a self-deceiver.” Other people may be the means to our self-deceptive ends. That is, we may mislead other people, withhold information or straightforwardly deceive them, and all of these actions may be part of our self-deceptive endeavors. Dings defines self-deception in the following manner: as “(i) a process that originates in (ii) a motivation or intention ..., which leads to (iii) a self-deceived end state (which can be the formation of a novel belief or the maintenance of an existing belief or other attitude)” (p. 17). In social self-deception, other people are a means to the self-deceptive process. Other people include, Dings writes, “in a practical and broad sense, their behavior, which includes verbal statements, facial expressions, body language but also the lack of behavior” (Dings, 2017, p. 17). While self-deception does not require others to participate, it can be stronger when someone else enables it. Dings describes two cases, each of which have two aspects positive and negative: situating (a) positive – by seeking like-minded people (e.g., going to a political party rally) and (b) negative – by avoiding non-like-minded people (as a conservative changing channels from MSNBC); and persuasive (a) positive such, as by trying to convince people to be like-minded (entering into political arguments) or (b) negative – such as by withholding information that would deter a person from becoming like-minded (describing Trump a an excellent steward of the economy even though the policies that drove growth largely stemmed from his predecessor). The latter two seem to highlight common strategies of news organizations like Fox News: convincing Trump’s supporters of the president’s inflated success rate or not mentioning that white nationalists have been found guilty of racist crimes. The easily accessible Internet and its many social media make such strategies so easy to undertake: to find people who share the same disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories, etc.,
linking from one reinforcing site to another and avoiding sites that provide evidence that conflicts with one’s a priori biases.

Collective self-deception infuses social self-deception into group behavior. Deweese-Boyd (2017) defines collective self-deception “as the holding of a false belief in the face of evidence to the contrary by a group of people as a result of shared desires, emotions, or intentions (depending upon the account of self-deception) favoring that belief” (Section 7.1). In this case, a group of individuals share levels of resentment about the status quo and share “the same belief for similar reasons and by similar means.” One can imagine a group of Trump supporters who share a belief in the success of his presidency by watching the same media outlets (e.g., Fox News), which in turn are reinforced by their peers, evangelical leaders, and like-minded associates.

What distinguishes collective self-deception from solitary self-deception is its social context; namely, that it occurs within a group that shares both the attitudes bringing about the false belief and the false belief itself. Compared to its solitary counterpart, self-deception within a collective is both easier to foster and more difficult to escape, being abetted by the self-deceptive efforts of others within the group (Deweese-Boyd, 2017).

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

1. Can you think of ways in which you may be deceiving yourself?
2. Can you think of ways you may be involved in behaviors or beliefs that can be described as social self-deception either in your experience or on the web?
3. Have you ever been involved in behaviors or beliefs that can be described as collective self-deception either in your experience or on the web?
4. Can it be argued that the white evangelical view that Trump was appointed by God in the manner of King Cyrus is a form of collective self-deception?

Lesson 5: Psychological factors.

There are psychological factors that predispose the uninformed or disinformed to ignore information or to accept or perpetuate disinformation.

1. Willful or deliberate ignorance: the conscious choice not to know.
   a. There are varieties of willful ignorance and they have both positive and negative dimensions.
   b. Willful ignorance is different than self-deception, because willful ignorance is always intentional whereas self-deception is not, the willfully ignorant can recognize that they are willfully ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived, willful ignorance (being more conscious) is therefore more culpable than self-deception.

2. Information avoidance is not the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception.
   a. Information avoidance as “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).
b. Reasons for information avoidance include: the information may demand a change in one’s beliefs or an undesired action, or the information itself or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions (p. 342).

(3) There is a growing literature on the social psychology of gullibility, summarized by Forgas and Baumeister.

a. Gullibility is “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).

b. Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual’s beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p. 2).

c. The psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality” (p. 5).

d. Forgas and Baumeister look at six psychological mechanisms of gullibility.
   i. The search for patterns and meaning: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they often find patterns and causation where there is none. (p. 8).

   ii. Acceptance bias: “the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information” (p. 9).

   iii. The power of heuristics: “Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine” (p. 9).

   iv. Overbelief in the self: we are prone to “self-serving biases and distortions” (p. 10).

   v. Social mechanisms of gullibility: “all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed” (p. 10).

   vi. Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate correctly incoming information in terms of its logical merits (p. 11).

(4) Factors related to Trump supporters.

a. Pettigrew outlines five factors that influence the uncritical acceptance of Trump by his supporters:
   i. authoritarianism
   ii. social dominance orientation (SDO, i.e., they prefer to associate only with socially dominant groups)
   iii. prejudice
   iv. low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves)
   v. relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are)

b. Trump supporters are less motivated by perceived economic anxiety than loss of status

c. There is a diversity of motivations among Trump supporters: resentment, greed, power, need to significance, prejudice, with different supporters prioritizing different values.

Part of the problem of dealing with persons imbued with espousing or promoting fake news is that one tries to approach them rationally. Taking clues from the last lesson, there are many psychological
factors at play that enable the success of various forms of self-deception, where rational arguments do not work. The first factor is what is called willful ignorance, which is not a matter of accepting or promoting disinformation, but ignoring information. Hertwig & Engle (2016) developed a taxonomy for deliberate ignorance: it is a device for, emotional regulation and regret avoidance, suspense and surprise maximization, performance enhancement, strategic behavior, impartiality and fairness, and cognitive sustainability and information management (pp. 361-364). While the authors do not answer the question about when this deliberate choice is good for the individual or society, when it “is beneficial, rationally or ethically appropriate” (p. 365). Yet they are aware that there is a sinister side, “when it is used to evade responsibility, escape liability or defend anti-intellectualism” (p. 365). Gigerenzer & Garcia-Retamero (2017) agree that, contrary to view that willful ignorance is irrational and counterintuitive, it has beneficial aspects in certain circumstances: when dealing with issues such as death and divorce as well as the pleasurable events (p. 195).

Kevin Lynch argues that willful ignorance is different than self-deception, because willful ignorance is always intentional whereas self-deception is not, the willfully ignorant can recognize that they are willfully ignorant, whereas the self-deceived are typically not fully aware that they are self-deceived, willful ignorance (being more conscious) is therefore more culpable than self-deception. (Lynch, 2016, p. 521). Alicke (2017) agrees, arguing that willful ignorance tends to be more adaptive than self-deception, and is a “cognitive strategy that people adopt to promote their emotional well-being,” whereas “self-deception is less controllable and more likely to be detrimental” (n.p.). Self-deception is less manageable (given its unconscious nature) because there are few resources to have the self-deceived face the truth.

Information avoidance is not the same as willful ignorance and may not be the same as self-deception. Sweeny, et al. (2010) define information avoidance as “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (p. 341). They suggest that the reasons for information avoidance include: the information may demand a change in one’s beliefs or an undesired action, or the information itself or the decision to learn information may cause unpleasant emotions or diminish pleasant emotions (p. 342). They note that these are not the only reasons for information avoidance. Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein (2017) take an approach that share in some of the modes of self-deception. For the methods of information avoidance, they include: physical avoidance, inattention, biased interpretation of information, forgetting and self-handicapping (choosing tasks that poorly match their capabilities) (pp. 99-104). The reasons they posit for the varieties of information avoidance share some of Hertwig & Engel’s 6 motivations for deliberate ignorance (above): hedonically driven information avoidance (such as risk, loss and disappointment aversion, anxiety, regret aversion, optimism maintenance or dissonance avoidance); belief investments, such as intrapersonal strategic avoidance (e.g., resisting temptation, motivation maintenance, avoiding projection biases, or abdicating responsibility) or interpersonal strategic avoidance (pp. 104-120). Many of these methods of information avoidance or the varieties of information avoidance can the strategies of the disinformed to remain disinformed.

There are growing studies in social psychology on the phenomenon of gullibility. Gullibility is defined by Forgas and Baumeister (2019) as “a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action” (p. 2). It is related to credulity, the tendency to accept assertions that are not supported by evidence. According to them, gullibility can occur in one of two situations: “Either an individual’s beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an
individual’s beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality” (p.2). While the former would seem to challenge and deny those who believe in the flat earth or who believe that John Kennedy, Jr is alive and well and working with Trump (as QAnon theorists believe), the latter is harder to pin down. “We often use the term *gullible* to describe persons whose beliefs violate some consensual rather than scientific standard of how reality should be viewed” (p. 2). “As long as knowledge is incomplete and subject to future falsification, identifying gullibility is more a matter of consensual value judgment rather than a statement of inconvertible fact. Gullibility may thus often be a matter of perspective, residing in the eye of the beholder” (p. 3). Having said that, it seems clear, based on a consensual understanding, the balance of powers in the federal government is being undermined. What has aggravated matters is the rise of the internet. Prior to mass communication and self-publishing, there was “the privileged class of experts, truth-seekers and truth-tellers who ... were institutionally established in our social systems and whose job was to discover and communicate the truth. They have now lost their privileged position and information monopoly. And now it seems that truth in public life is now also at risk” (p. 5). There is slippage in loyalty to national newspapers, which used to be arbiters of consensual truth, partly aggravated by claims by Trump that they publish fake news when their stories about him are critical.

Why are people gullible? According to Forgas and Baumeister,

> One of the psychological foundations of gullibility, paradoxically, appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Indeed, our evolutionary history (Harari, 2014; Pinker, 2018; von Hippel, 2018) suggests that perhaps the most revolutionary cognitive development of our species occurred when we made the dramatic leap from being creatures who are bound by immediate reality to becoming creatures who can accept and act on consensual symbolic information or “memes” as if it was reality (Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 2017). This ability to accept symbolic information from others and treat it as real is also one major foundation of all human cultural evolution (Harari, 2014). (p. 5).

The authors then look at psychological mechanisms of gullibility. They present five: (1) Imagined causation or pattern recognition: because human beings want to make sense of reality, they often find patterns and causation where there is none. (p. 8). (2) Acceptance bias: “the near-universal tendency for human beings to accept rather than reject information” (p. 9). Information provided tends to be treated as true, and time and effort must be made to render it false. The authors add: “The acceptance bias shows how gullibility occurs when people are distracted by other information, emotion, or time pressure.” Given the din of hundreds of information channels and the emotionally charged political atmosphere, it is no surprise that people rally around few sources. (3) Power of heuristics: “Human beings are more prone to believe interesting, captivating stories and narratives that are salient and easy to imagine (Kahneman & Tversky, 2000). When we are exposed to salient, frequent, and thus easily remembered information, due to a strange ‘mental bug’ in our information processing system, such information will also be seen as more true, reliable, and valid” (p.9). Coupled with the first two mechanisms, we can easily see the effect of Fox News or MSNBC or other news or social media channels. “Typically, what is familiar, readily available, salient, focal, representative, and colorful captures our imagination and attention, and is given far more credence than it deserves” (p. 9). (4)
Overbelief in the self: related to the Dunning-Kruger effect (see Lesson on Cognitive Authorities), we are prone to “self-serving biases and distortions” (p. 10). People hold onto their beliefs considerably more than is warranted. (5) Social mechanisms of gullibility: “all symbolic knowledge is socially constructed and shared. Comparing our views and ideas with the views and ideas of others is the way all symbolic reality is constructed” (p.10). Perhaps grounding Dings’ assertions that in social self-deception, other people are a means to our self-deceptive processes, Forgas and Baumeister assert that “In an inherently ambiguous and uncertain environment, humans will spontaneously construct shared norms and standards that, however arbitrary, will impose a semblance of consensual order and predictability on their view of reality (Sherif, 1936)” (p. 10). Once these consensual norms are established, they are difficult to modify. When we think of the notion of consensual reality promoted by Fox News, all fostered by the previous psychological mechanisms, we can believe that their viewers notion of reality will be difficult to change, especially because it is reinforced by so many channels: friends, colleagues, political associates, church fellowship members, social media, etc.

What others think and do continues to have a powerful normative influence on human behavior, even if those norms are not internalized, and indeed, disbelieved (Asch, 1951). It turns out that the very process of openly discussing divergent views about reality can be a mechanism that promotes the acceptance of more extreme and biased views, as the voluminous research on group polarization phenomena shows … (p. 11)

The final psychological mechanism that Forgas and Baumeister consider is: (6) Epistemological failures to monitor and correct. Human beings fail to monitor and evaluate correctly incoming information in terms of its logical merits, based on what Forgas and Baumeister call “metacognitive myopia,” a failure to think about our thinking. Unfortunately, this is not a natural way in which human beings think, despite all the textbooks on formal logic and scientific successes built upon it. The lessons on logical fallacies and ethical principles were included in Lessons 7 and 8 to help address this issue.

In addition to the research on gullibility, there is also a significant amount of psychological literature dedicated to trying to understand the factors that influence supporters of Trump. Thomas Pettigrew’s (2017) paper, "Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters," shines a light on this group. Without dismissing the political factors that may be at work or claiming that this list is exhaustive, he identifies an array of factors reflecting five major social psychological phenomena that account for the bulk of Trump supporters’ devotion: authoritarianism, social dominance orientation (SDO, i.e., they prefer to associate only with socially dominant groups), prejudice, low intergroup contact (i.e., little familiarity with groups other than themselves), and relative deprivation (i.e., feeling that others are much better off than they are).

Pettigrew documents that many Trump supporters are attracted to authoritarian characters. Authoritarianism is characterized by such traits as "deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups [meaning any group with which the individual does not identify], a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experience" (Pettigrew, 2017, p. 108). Authoritarians see the world as dangerous and fear guides their response to it. While there is a debate among social psychologists about whether authoritarianism is a personality construct or a political ideology, Pettigrew argues that "there is no necessary conflict between these two perspectives" and that authoritarianism usually starts as a personality orientation which then leads to an engagement with right-wing political ideology. From an authoritarian view, the motivation lies in fear, and the rhetoric of Trump provides fuel for the fire, which leads his supporters to consider him to be an authority of matters of American security, leading them to
support him in his efforts to secure the borders against outgroups, including through family separation and through a border wall between the United States and Mexico.

Pettigrew defines SDO as “an individual's preference for the societal hierarchy of groups and domination over lower-status groups” (p. 108). People who want to maintain the current social hierarchy have an SDO. They believe members of other groups are inferior to members of their own. People with strong SDO are “typically dominant, driven, tough-minded, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power” (p. 108). Trump’s assertions that he alone can solve the nation’s problems and that those who oppose him are “losers” are good examples. Losers now include all newspapers and media who are critical of him, while Fox News, Republicans, and conservatives are winners. Trump’s supporters embrace of authoritarianism and SDO also make them more likely to accept outright lying by commission or omission or by paltering a part of the morally acceptable behavior of politicians, according to research published in the journal Personality and Individual Differences, by Jonas De Keersmaecker and Arne Roets of Ghent University in Belgium. This is generally more applicable to Republicans rather than to Democrats (De Keersmaecker & Roets, 2019).

Pettigrew’s third factor points out that Trump supporters are anti-outgroup generally as well as anti-immigrant. In the 2016 election, Trump launched rhetorical attacks on immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims. His actions in office have reinforced that stance: bans on entrants to the country from certain Muslim countries, harsh restrictions for asylum seekers, the separation of children from their parents at the border as a measure to discourage immigration, and claiming that some white nationalists are “very fine people.” Support for Trump correlates highly with a standard scale of modern racism, which Trump has now fully articulated in remarks that Congresswomen Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna S. Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, should go back to where they came from, making references to their ethnic origins, and by having his supporters at his rallies chant: “send her back” (Davis, 2019).

Pettigrew (p. 108) also observes that there is growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have little contact with groups other than their own. They have less experience with minorities such as Muslims, Mexicans, or even Black Americans, than other Americans. Low intergroup contact makes it easier to dismiss members of other groups as foreign, un-American, or inferior. Ignorance of others allows one to self-enforce negative stereotypes, as in Trump’s references to immigrants as “animals” (Davis & Chokshi, 2018).

Pettigrew’s fifth factor, relative deprivation, is particularly supportive of collective social self-deception. A myth arose after the 2016 election that Trump had won because he appealed to poor and unemployed people. However, Trump supporters were less likely than others to be unemployed, employed part-time, or looking for work. And those voters living in districts with more manufacturing were actually less inclined to vote for Trump. Yet the original narrative rightly identified a sense of deprivation. It just failed to identify that this was a perception of deprivation, not its actuality.

In the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of May 2018, Diane Mutz reports that Trump supporters are less motivated by perceived economic anxiety than loss of status. She says that their “changing preferences were related to changes in the [Republican] party’s positions on issues related to American global dominance and the rise of a majority–minority America: issues that threaten white Americans’ sense of dominant group status” (Mutz, 2018).
Trump supporters nurture resentment, perhaps less so for economic issues than for loss of status, which motivates their deception and self-deception. Hours of Fox News and social media sites denigrating “welfare queens,” welfare programs, the more frequent appearance of minorities on media, and the media’s and advertising’s version of what an ordinary American home is supposed to be like are fanning the flames. Trump supporters feel impotent to regain their dominant position as white people, but feel they can gain potency through elevating their in-group by supporting someone who promises to defend the existing social hierarchy. They feel that they are victims of the forces of politics, corporations, education, and demographic shifts and the president’s focus on those themes makes them feel empowered. Trump’s notion of self-empowerment ironically lies beside his claim that they have little power, but this irony appears to elude them.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

(1) Can you remember occasions in which you were gullible? Can you sort out which psychological mechanism(s) may have been involved: the search for patterns and meaning, acceptance bias, the power of heuristics, overbelief in the self, social mechanisms of gullibility, or epistemological failures to monitor and correct?

(2) Can you find a few well-founded psychological studies that show how the misinformed or disinform engaged in one or more of the following behaviors to maintain their ignorance, disinformation, or self-deception?
   a. Sustaining oneself in ignorance - deliberately choosing not to know.
   b. Preexisting attitudes and the continued influence of misinformation or disinformation, in a manner of confirmation bias.
   c. Information avoidance.
   d. Misperceptions: understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics.
   e. The role of cognitive ability on the impact of false information on social impressions.
   f. Use of social media to increase racist behavior.
   g. Self-deception as a function of social status.
   h. In addition to the study above, psychological studies regarding Donald Trump’s unwavering support.
   i. Unfalsifiability (the practice by which people when, confronted with facts, reframe an argument in a way that makes it impossible to test to validate their viewpoint).


Lesson 6: Cognitive authorities.

Key ideas:

(1) Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.
(2) Cognitive authority exists on a continuum, exists in relation to a sphere of interest, and involves at least two people.
(3) Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.
(4) Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., Fox News or MSNBC.
For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty. This is true for both authentic and false cognitive authorities. News media can produce assertions as “true opinions,” “false opinions,” or “preferential opinions.” They exist as opinions in the minds of the consumers until they are verified or not or whether there are grounds for not needing to pursue their verification. Human beings may employ heuristics or mental shortcuts to deal with information. Unfortunately, “These mental shortcuts exacerbate the human inability to see the world as it really is” (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 9). The use of these mental shortcuts can be true of those who are either conservative or liberal or political actors of another stripe. Consumers of news media hear content from Fox News or MSNBC and may absorb the provided opinions as second-hand knowledge. This may result in a heuristic, to trust this source, regardless of its actual basis in truth or evidence. The ultimate determination of whether a cognitive authority is genuine or false is not a measure of consumer loyalty, but whether their posted content can be ultimately authenticated and verified. There are enhancers or accelerators that make such news, particularly fake news, more plausible:
(a) Psychological factors addressed in the last lesson, such as prejudice, resentment, greed, power, or other motivations predispose those disinfomed to embrace and perpetuate disinformation.
(b) Repeating information, true or not, increases its believability and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). It also applies to cable news and its pundits, its consumers, their peer groups, party or viewpoint associates or associations, and leaders (including religious leaders).
(c) The Dunning-Kruger effect that suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. To put it simply, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize it (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017).
(d) Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel.
(e) Agnotology is a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (Agnotology, 2016). Wilson (1983) notes several properties of cognitive authority: (1) Cognitive authority is related to credibility. A person who has cognitive authority on a particular subject is regarded as a credible source for that topic. A friend who has installed many computer networks for friends and colleagues can be a cognitive authority on the subject of network installation. Wilson writes that credibility consists primarily of “competence and trustworthiness” (p.13). I trust my competent friend to instruct me properly on how to install a network in my home. (2) Cognitive authority exists on a continuum. A person may know a lot or a little about a subject. For example, a person who has worked on network installation in a professional environment has more expertise than someone who had only done it for friends. Wilson notes that some cognitive authorities have so much knowledge that they become arbiters of settled opinion on a subject (p. 18). Newspapers such as The New York Times and Washington Post once played that role, perhaps less so today than in the past, given the growth of social media. Unfortunately, a steady campaign of false allegations about the reliability of their content has chipped away at many people’s faith in these authorities. (3) Cognitive authority exists in relation to a sphere of interest. These spheres can be well-defined or ill-defined: an expert on the orchestral
recordings of Beethoven has different authority than a general expert in classical music. (4) Cognitive authority involves at least two people. One can have cognitive authority without being a recognized expert. A person who has worked as a science journalist for a reputable publication has less cognitive authority than a doctor, who may have less cognitive authority than a medical researcher. A person may become a cognitive authority for a specific person or set of persons for a specific topic or set of topics. For example, we may have friends we ask for their book reviews because we share their taste and trust their judgment, but our friends are not professional book critics. (5) There are brands of expertise not related to knowledge, expertise that may not justify the qualification of cognitive authority.

Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites such as Instagram, etc. For my purposes, Wilson’s original notion is being enlarged to include institutions such as news media and organizations.

In order to provide focus for this issue, we will take two cable news channels, that of MSNBC and Fox News. Both are cognitive authorities for those that access them. The measure of one’s commitment to them can be gauged in terms of loyalty. The results of the Pew Research study show the diversity of media in play, the variety among news consumers, and their differing levels of loyalty to diverse media. Older Americans are more attached to traditional media and television (Mitchell, Barthel, Shearer, & Gottfried, 2016). MSNBC and Fox News exhibit comparable levels of bias: on a scale of extreme left, left, left center, least biased, right center, right, extreme right, Media Bias/Fact Check rates MSNBC as “left” and Fox News as “right” (MSNBC, n.d.; Fox News, n.d.).

With respect to news channels such as MSNBC, trustworthiness implies that reporting is based on evidence or facts. If there is a question, it can be traced back to sources of evidence or facts, as they are known at the time of reporting. Factual reporting means that the disclosure of truth may be progressive or even regressive. The first details of an event may be sketchy, if not incorrect, and what matters is that the reporting is consonant with the latest details of an event, and that it is faithful to the evidence. MSNBC primarily relies on NBC reporters for their news, and while their factual rating is mixed, that is due to MSNBC’s use of political pundits. Reliable cognitive authorities only change the facts they report if they actually change. When they discover errors in their reporting, they make corrections (MSNBC, n.d.). While experts are used, they appear to make appropriate assessments and judgments based on their experience and knowledge. However, many liberals may fall into self-deceptive and collective self-deceptive practices, if they accept MSNBC assessments without independently verifying the basis of such assessments or their integration into their current state of understanding (beyond confirmation bias). Fox News, like MSNBC, claims to be trustworthy and have expertise. They tout a lineup of daily reporters and experts who claim to be reliable and credible. They have convinced their viewers that this is accurate. But their only source for fact-checking is the Wall Street Journal (Fox News, n.d.)

Their pro-Trump stories continuously report factually incorrect data. For example, Trump has declared that the Mueller Report completely exonerated him, and all of Fox News and its pundits echo this. But in fact, the Mueller Report explicitly stated that the special prosecutor could not exonerate the president. When reporting that a “witch hunt” had tarnished Trump’s otherwise unblemished reputation, Fox News and its pundits rarely referenced the number of indictments and guilty pleas that resulted from the Mueller investigation. While many Americans have little trust in Fox, there are selected audiences who trust it deeply. According to a Pew Research Center survey, “Fox News was the main source [of news] for 40% of Trump voters” during the 2016 election (Mitchell, Gottfried & Barthel,
2017). Another Pew survey summarizes, “When it comes to choosing a media source for political news, conservatives orient strongly around Fox News. Nearly half of consistent conservatives (47%) name it as their main source for government and political news” (Mitchell, Matsa, Gottfried & Kiley, 2014).

A real cognitive authority would present stories that are consistent, cohesive, and coherent over time, with few inconsistencies or reversals (but not none). This description does not apply to Fox News (Zorn, 2018). Inconsistencies abound in the network’s news reporting: the diverse, inconsistent views of the president are repeated on the news without acknowledging such changes, and the conservative vision of not so many years ago seems to have disappeared as Republican leaders and administrators demonstrate a lack of moral character, a failure to implement fiscal responsibility, and, contradicting the libertarian wing of the conservative movement, increasing government intrusion in the form of the carceral state, interference with women’s reproductive rights, and immigration restriction. Instead of promoting second-hand “knowledge,” Fox News often promotes second-hand opinion at best, opinion that could rarely, if ever, be converted into fact. It generally promulgates a cognitive state that can produce which neither opinion, right opinion, or knowledge, but where demonstrably “false knowledge” emerges as fact. When questioned about the beliefs uttered by Fox News, their viewers are generally unable to make a coherent response, and resort to irrelevant facts.

News media can produce assertions as “true opinions,” “false opinions,” or “preferential opinions.” They exist as opinions in the minds of the consumers until they are verified or not or whether there are grounds for not needing to pursue their verification. As noted in the chapter on psychological factors, human beings may employ heuristics to deal with this kind of information. As Forgas and Baumeister note, “When we are exposed to salient, frequent, and thus easily remembered information,” such as occurs on Fox News or the New York Times, this information will be regarded as “true, reliable and valid” (p. 9). Unfortunately, “These mental shortcuts exacerbate the human inability to see the world as it really is” (p. 9). The use of such shortcuts can be true of those who are either conservatives or liberals or political actors of another stripe. These are reinforced by repetition through social media, colleagues, peers, political and religious leaders, news pundits, etc.

Consumers of news media hear content from Fox News or MSNBC and may absorb the provided opinions as second-hand knowledge. This may result in a heuristic, to trust this source, regardless of its actual basis in truth or evidence. Such consumption may amount to confirmation bias, unless the consumer can verify the produced assertions in facts, evidence, or reason or have grounds for accepting second-hand knowledge without pursuing verification. On the other hand, consumers may be quite knowledgeable about the provided information and its sources and accept it as an information processing heuristic. The ultimate determination of whether a cognitive authority is genuine or false is not a measure of consumer loyalty, but whether their posted content can be ultimately authenticated and verified. The problem is that many disinformation consumers are unwilling to do the work of authentication, and choose to acquiesce to their confirmation bias and to their self-deception and collective self-deception. The same can to said to a lesser degree of information consumers that have a long history with an information source that appears to be consistently reliable, accurate, trustworthy and committed to acknowledging errors or repealing stories that lack any foundation.

What makes fake news consumers and disseminators work so well are what can be called accelerators or enhancers many of which are traceable to the psychological mechanisms of gullibility, mentioned in the last lesson. Many fake news consumers are preconditioned by the psychological factors
enumerated in the lesson above, such motivations as prejudice, resentment, greed, power, etc. A study entitled “Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news,” reported that repeating information, true or not, increases its believability and this applies to newspaper headlines, statements, or speeches (Pennycook, Cannon & Rand, 2018). This is reinforced by viewing “echo chambers,” defined by Törnberg (2018) as “online social media groups that reinforce perspectives and enable confirmation bias.” See also social mechanisms of gullibility in the last lesson.

There is also the Dunning-Kruger effect that suggests that people are uncritical about their own abilities and uncritical of their lack of critical thinking. That is, people of poor intelligence lack the intelligence to recognize it (Dunning–Kruger effect, 2017). This effect seemed to be further verified by a study by De Keersmaecker & Roets (2017) that indicated that the first impressions of fake news cannot be corrected by showing that the information was incorrect, especially in those with lower cognitive abilities, who tend not have the cognitive ability to be flexible in their attitudes. Even after learning of that the original information was incorrect, it has a persevering negative influence on their social impressions. This approach is also supported by overbelief in the self, articulated in the last lesson.

Once acquired, false information is hard to dispel. David Rapp's research on memory and learning reveals that our brains retain information without retaining its source and therefore we do not recall a key fact about its validity. He also finds that it is difficult to remember that information we had previously believed is false (Waters and Hargadon, 2017). This research is echoed in the psychological mechanism of epistemological failures to monitor and correct, seen in the last lesson. This suggests the lingering effect of Fox News propagation of false conspiracy theories.

Finally, Robert N. Proctor coined a word for the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, agnotology. He identified a specialized technique for spreading misinformation that makes information seekers more doubtful of views or information that they already hold (Agnotology, 2016). By way of example Proctor described the tobacco industry’s use of advertising to generate doubt that smoking causes cancer or other illnesses. Climate change deniers, proponents of fracking, pesticide manufacturers, and opponents of allegedly “fake news” use a similar approach. The echoing of Trump’s attacks on the justice department, the FBI, the Democratic party, and other intelligence agencies on Fox News and alt-right social media play the same role.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

(1) Who or what are some of your cognitive authorities? How do you evaluate their credibility, trustworthiness, and competence?

(2) What are your favorite news sources? Are they biased? If biased, do they report facts and evidence impartially? Does its bias skew what is reported? Check the sources at the site Media Bias (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/) for an indication of bias. How loyal are you sources that may be biased?

(3) When you tune into your favorite news source, what kind of opinions does it assert (“true opinions,” “false opinions,” or “preferential opinions”)? How do you sort them out? Can you convert what might be considered a true opinion into some form of knowledge? How? What do you do about false opinions or preferential opinions?

(4) Can you name some occasions where news sources made assertions that you took as confirmation of something you already believe?
Can you find a genuine cognitive authority and a false cognitive authority? How do you make that evaluation? How does the false cognitive authority enhance it “credibility” through one or more of the accelerators or enhancers? How have their promoted credibility through social self-deception or collective self-deception?

Can you find occurrences of collective self-deception? What cognitive authority or authorities facilitate that self-deception? What are the enhancers for such collective self-deception? Consider the white evangelical view that Trump was appointed by God in the manner of King Cyrus or that the United States is a Christian nation whose governmental agencies should conform to Christian precepts or that the United States is nation founded for and run by white people.

Lesson 7: Logical fallacies.

Key ideas:

1. Logical fallacies are instances of deceptive or specious reasoning that make poor arguments appear to be superficially attractive. They are sleights of hand that attempt to divert attention from the core issue to irrelevant considerations.

2. There are hundreds of logical fallacies that have been cataloged, but this chapter will focus on some politicians and disinformation specialists often employ, including argumentum ad hominem, the straw man fallacy, and the argument from pity.

3. One is only successful with this strategy of confronting logical fallacies if the proponents are willing to engage in rational discourse, although one can point out the nature of the fallacy to third-party observers.

4. A given argument can commit more than one fallacy.

A fallacy has two general meanings: (1) a false or erroneous statement, something that is untrue and (2) deceptive or specious reasoning. Logical fallacies fall into the latter category, because they are attempts to weaken one’s opponent’s arguments, by trying to deflect attention away from the content of the argument. Fallacious arguments can be quite persuasive, at least to the casual reader or listener. One can find dozens of examples of fallacious reasoning in newspapers, advertisements, and all through political rhetoric whether of liberal or conservative stripe. Mastering the recognition of or understanding logical fallacies provides a rhetorical advantage in being able to deflect the intended effect of fallacies, to deceive and misdirect.

There are hundreds of logical fallacies, as given in such compendiums as Bo Bennett’s The Ultimate Collection of over Three Hundred Logical Fallacies (2019) (r). For illustrations, we will sketch a few cases of them, but others can be included in the elaborated lesson.

The argumentum ad hominem, an argument against the person. This fallacy occurs when one attacks the character of the person advancing the argument, rather than addressing or refuting the argument itself. It moves the discussion from issues to personalities or characteristics of one’s opponent. Demolishing an argument by attacking the opponent’s motives, background, or personal traits is an ad hominem attack. This is a fallacy because it the only way to address an issue is with reasons or evidence with regard to claims of the person advancing the argument, not comments about their character. It is perhaps the most heavily used logical fallacy in Trump’s arsenal of fallacies. Some of Trumps early advertisements attacked Hillary Clinton’s health instead of her policies: “Hillary Clinton doesn’t have the
fortitude, strength or stamina to lead in our world. She failed as Secretary of State. Don’t let her fail us again” (Beckwith, 2016). *The New York Times* has kept track of Trump's *ad hominem* tweets, which are mostly examples of name-calling, and it publishes these in an ongoing list (Lee & Quealy, 2019 - started in 2016, but current).

The straw man fallacy. This fallacy occurs when one distorts the opponent’s position and frames it into easily refutable terms. By criticizing this distortion, the fallacy maker claims victory over the opponent, whose original argument was quite different. Trump claimed that “Hillary Clinton wants to take your guns away, and she wants to abolish the Second Amendment!” While she advocated for gun control, she never has suggested that she wants to eliminate guns. The NRA produced an ad called “Don’t Let Hillary Clinton Leave You Defenseless,” which depicts a woman who is alone at night when her house is broken into. She reaches for her gun, but Hillary and her Supreme Justices have taken gun rights away, so there is no gun (Dumenco, 2016). Because it takes too long for the police to arrive, the woman becomes a victim because she could not defend herself.

Appeal to Pity (*ad misericordiam*). Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed that no president in history has been treated worse than him, ever. For example, at the commencement ceremony for the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, he said: “No politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly” (Nakamura, 2017).

A given case can illustrate more than one logical fallacy. Responding to Ilhan Omar’s supposedly “anti-Semitic” tweet about Israel, Sarah Huckabee Sanders defended President Trump’s assertion that the Democratic Party has become “anti-Israel” and “anti-Jewish”:

> The president has been an unwavering and committed ally to Israel and the Jewish people, and frankly the remarks that have been made by a number of Democrats and failed to be called out by Democratic leadership is frankly abhorrent and it’s sad and it’s something that should be called by name. (Moore, 2019)

This could be seen as a Red Herring fallacy. This involves drawing attention to irrelevant points, or changing the subject or dodging the issue. “Red Herring” is a hunting term that refers to dragging a herring on the hunting course to lead the hounds away from the pursuit of the prey. Sanders does not discuss the issue of the Democratic party being Anti-Jewish, instead she talks about how Trump supports the Jewish people. That fact may or may not be a true but it has nothing to do about the stance of the Democratic party.

Sanders’s remarks also exemplify the Hasty Generalization (or Jumping to a Conclusion) fallacy. That is, it is drawn from inadequate evidence. Sanders indicates that remarks by some Democrats such as Ilhan Omar must mean that all Democrats are anti-Semitic.

Sanders’s remarks can also be seen as instances of Begging the Question or Circular Reasoning. That is, something is assumed to be true that has yet to be established or demonstrated. In this case, she implies that because Democrats failed to challenge those statements, they must be anti-Semitic. Thus she proves something not with evidence but with lack thereof.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:
1. Using a guide such as Lily Lou’s *Spot the Flaw in a Politician’s Argument With This Guide to Logical Fallacies* (2017), [https://lifehacker.com/spot-the-flaw-in-a-politicians-argument-with-this-guide-1796333209](https://lifehacker.com/spot-the-flaw-in-a-politicians-argument-with-this-guide-1796333209) or Bo Bennett’s *The Ultimate Collection of over Three Hundred Logical Fallacies* [https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/205/What-is-a-Logical-Fallacy-Exactly](https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/tools/lp/Bo/LogicalFallacies/205/What-is-a-Logical-Fallacy-Exactly), can you find specific cases of logical fallacies in advertisements, in political speeches or on the Internet, and explain why each instance is a specific case of one or more logical fallacies?

Lesson 8: Ethical principles.

Key ideas:

1. There are commonly accepted ethical principles characteristic of Western culture, with versions often found in non-Western cultures.
2. Many political actions and policies advocated by the disinformation proponents or politicians or governmental agencies violate one or more ethical principles.

In addition to logical fallacies that are rampant in the disinformation marketplace, there are also many ethical principles that are violated. While there is some disagreement about the priority and number of foundational ethical principles, we can assert, at least for Western culture: (1) Respect the moral autonomy of self and others (in other words, do unto others as others would do unto you, or in Confucian terms, do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire); (2) Seek justice or fairness; (3) Seek social harmony; (4) Act in such a way that the amount of harm is minimized or, better, that existing functional relationships are maintained or promoted; and (5) Be faithful to organizational, professional, or public trust. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, and the fact is that some of these values can conflict with each other. For example, seeking social harmony or the maximum amount of happiness for the greatest number of people sometimes is inconsistent with respect for individuals: universal vaccination may infringe on individual liberty (however misplaced the choice to avoid vaccination may be). Yet some situations violate all five principles, such as Trump’s treatment of immigrants seeking asylum at the southern border. Principle 1 states that we must respect the moral autonomy of each and every human being, a principle embodied in Kant’s categorical imperative (Treat others as ends and never merely as means) and echoed in most religions’ precepts (many foundational sacred texts explicitly mandate care for the poor, the sick, and the stranger). Treating asylum seekers as having no rights (e.g., violating Geneva Conventions), separating children from their parents, and keeping children in dangerous and unsanitary conditions are profound violations of this principle. If we look at the second principle, seek justice or fairness, we also see violations: to ignore or delay due process of asylum claims is neither just or fair. Trump and his administration do claim that their policies will protect the social harmony of the United States, arguing that asylum seekers are rapists, crooks, and job displacers. However, these claims are false. The growth and happiness of the United States is in fact due to inclusion and integration of immigrants, those who have come and those who continue to come. The policies also fail to minimize harm. Rather, the administration seems intent on a high level of cruelty, under that notion that it may deter immigration: e.g., separating children from parents (with no plan to reunite them), delaying legal procedures for asylum seekers, trying to prevent asylum seekers from stepping on US soil, keeping them in abysmal conditions, etc. These policies destroy functional relationships, such as those between parents and their children and...
other relatives. (5) Finally, the president’s policies violate the ethic to be faithful to organizational, professional or public trust. To uphold his role in the public trust, the President is to uphold the Constitution, enforce established procedures for asylum seekers, and seek the common good. He fails the public trust in these and other cases.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

(1) Can you find specific instances, actions, or policies of politicians or the government that violate one or more of the given ethical principles? Give details about the case, actions, or policies (with source documentation, such as URL) and explain specifically how specific ethical principles are violated.

Lesson 9: Social media.

Key ideas:

(1) Social media are the hotbed of information and disinformation and the InfoWars, particularly where and when disinformation is quickly and broadly spread.

(2) Specific social media, such as Instagram, cultivate, support, and perpetuate disinformation and conspiracy memes.

(3) While one can explore such media to find the origins of certain memes or conspiracy theories, there is little regulation of their content, expect for possible intervention of their creators, but such interventions are rare, under the mandate of free speech or the first amendment.

Social media, including Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, Twitter, Tumblr, Telegram, Reddit, Baidu Tieba, LinkedIn, LINE, Snapchat, and Pinterest, among many others, are a hotbed of information and disinformation. According to Wikipedia, social media sites share the following properties: they are interactive Internet-based applications; they live on user-generated content (e.g., posts, texts, videos, photos); they create profiles for the app or website that are maintained by its social media creators; and they facilitate the interactions of members or groups (Social Media, 2019).

Social media are immensely important for the spread and speed of disinformation. Researchers have determined that false information spreads more quickly and broadly than genuine information, and that those on the right are more susceptible to believe and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the left. Social media disinformation is spread by trolls, such as the Russians, and Trump and right-wing supporters on the one side, and liberals and progressives on the other side. There are also click-bait entrepreneurs whose allegiance is to making money and generally not to either side, though this allegiance leads them to be more likely to promote right-wing ideology, because the right are more easily seduced with clicks that support their confirmation bias. We will look at special techniques for the spread of disinformation in social media, such as bots, deep-fake videos, and fake accounts that mimic the genuine interests of average individuals.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

(1) Can you specific examples of social media in your experience and/or in web sites that exhibit extensive levels of disinformation, bias, deceit or conspiracy theories?
Lesson 10: Enhanced Information literacy.

Key ideas:

1. Information literacy has many important dimensions: determining the credibility of web sites; learning how to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the information sought for information needs; learning the merits, defects, and effective use of search engines; learning about the structure of information sources so as to continue to learn about how they work; and taking the pro-Truth pledge.

2. With this set of lessons, we have expanded our strategies in information literacy, by considering: (a) characteristics of the Age of Disinformation; (b) the varieties of false information; (c) knowledge, opinion and, second-hand knowledge; (d) deception and self-deception; (e) psychological factors; (f) cognitive authorities; (g) logical fallacies; (h) ethical principles; and (i) social media.

There are many important lessons in information literacy:

1. Determining the credibility of web sites, especially those espousing fake news, by analyzing their currency, the authorship (if available), the quality of their links and supporting resources such as bibliographic references, and by checking with experts or with fact-checking sites, such as PolitiFact (http://www.politifact.com/), FactCheck (https://www.factcheck.org/) or Snopes (https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/). For a comprehensive approach to web site evaluation, see: http://www.citationmachine.net/mla/cite-a-newspaper/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=new+york+times&commit=Search+Newspapers (Citation Machine, n.d.).

2. Learning how to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the information sought for information needs, whether in library, media, or Internet sources. While menu-driven systems are useful in searching online databases, there are unknown hazards if one is trying to do a comprehensive search. For example, if one is looking in the research database, ARTbibliographies Modern, for a list of publications, by Yves-Alain Bois from 1980 to the present, one would typically enter the author name as given in the search. But it turns out that the database has there are six variations of the author’s name: ("Bois, Yve Alain" OR "Bois, Yve-Alain" OR "Bois, Y -A" OR "Blois, Yve-Alain" OR "Bois, Y A" OR "Bois, Yves-Alain"). If one used only the given name, one would lose all the other entries. Many, if not, users think that computers automatically map all variations of an author’s name to a single entry, but it does not. This is not only true for this database but many others. Furthermore, one can increase the precision of organized information collections, such as library databases, by learning about the indexing or subject terms used to construct the database. There are many other issues to learn about databases and their construction that could enhance one’s ability to search more effectively.
(3) Learning the merits, defects, and effective use of search engines

a. Choice of vocabulary in a search engine is important. A search on *kidney neoplasms* will generally produce qualitatively better results than *kidney cancer*, because the former is the accepted medical terminology, used in scientific studies.

b. Use of search engine qualifiers will improve the quality of one’s search, such as these Google techniques, Refine Web Searches (https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/2466433?hl=en&ref_topic=3081620) or Advanced Search Techniques (https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/35890?hl=en&ref_topic=3081620).

c. All search engines exhibit bias. There are 200 factors that affect how Google orders its search results (https://backlinko.com/google-ranking-factors), but most do so only slightly (https://optinmonster.com/seo-ranking-factors/). For example, new sites often rank low, the most popular sites (build on the notion of link popularity – the more sites that link to a particular site are call link popular) are high on the output list. But what is popular may not be the best. Sites that load slowly on mobile phones are ranked low but may have good information. Since 95% of searchers never go beyond the first page, this is a serious problem (Santora, 2019).

(4) Ideally, information seekers will learn how to learn by understanding how knowledge is organized and indexed and about pitfalls in failing to critically reflect on issues in information systems, such as library catalogs and information databases.

(5) Taking the Pro-Truth Pledge (https://www.protruthpledge.org/) personally and professionally (e.g., check information to confirm its truth before accepting and sharing it) and by promoting others to take the pro-truth pledge.

What enhances the information literacy strategies mentioned above are all the strategies outlined in the previous lessons:

(6) Understanding, identifying, and combatting the negative characteristics of the Age of Disinformation;

(7) Understanding, identifying, and combatting varieties of false information on the Internet;

(8) Understanding, identifying, and combatting false forms of knowledge, opinion, and second-hand knowledge;

(9) Understanding, identifying, and combatting false cognitive authorities;

(10) Understanding, identifying, and combatting the psychological characteristics that foster disinformation among the disinfomed;

(11) Understanding, identifying, and combatting the characteristics of self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception, that inhibit any form of rational discourse or critical thinking;

(12) Understanding, identifying, and combatting the logical fallacies partisans use to try to advance their cause;

(13) Understanding, identifying, and combatting the violation of ethical principles advanced by various political actors, actions, and policies; and

(14) Understanding, identifying, and combatting common techniques for the propagation of disinformation in social media.
Given this battery of strategies, one can become well-equipped for dealing with the venues of disinformation in the Age of Disinformation.

Exercise suggestions will call on learners to consider the following questions:

(1) Can you locate two specific web sites and evaluate their credibility?
(2) Taking a specific research question, can you locate, evaluate, and use effectively information from one specific library or library database and one internet source (e.g., Google Scholar)?
(3) Can you create three searches on Google, where you use at least two of its advanced features for each search? See Google techniques, Refine Web Searches (https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/2466433?hl=en&ref_topic=3081620) or Advanced Search Techniques (https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/35890?hl=en&ref_topic=3081620). Can you explain the merits and defects of the results of your searches?
(4) Can you find out about and take Pro-Truth Pledge (https://www.protruthpledge.org/)?

Endnote:

In addition to new material, this paper is derived from three sources: Froehlich (2017); Froehlich (2019); and the course, *The Age of Disinformation*, that the author created and taught, Kent State University (Spring, 2018; Spring, 2019).
Bibliography:


