

Lesson 1: Introduction to the Age of Disinformation.

Key Ideas:

- Disinformation is false information by which its creators and disseminators intend to deceive its receivers. It has always been around. What has changed is level, speed, breadth, coordination, aggregation, and effectiveness of disinformation both through media and social media, both for the purposes of greed and political power. Because of its widespread use and effects, the Age of Information has become the Age of Disinformation. In fact, such disinformation turns into propaganda by repetition and saturation, by repeating the same message through multiple channels and institutions, that facilitates its acceptance and normalcy, especially where alternative resources are suppressed or invalidated.
- Ironically, one of the factors that has facilitated the upsurge in the acceptance of disinformation or misinformation, is the huge growth of information sources, services, media -- in short, information overload and its availability through hundreds of sources, channels and media and their aggressive solicitation for attention. As a method of dealing with it, information seekers have come to settle on a few sources or authorities, many of which feed their biases and resentments.
- The internet has facilitated this trend, by facilitating and enlarging the voice of individuals and groups, often hiding their identity or source (whether domestic or foreign) with little or no constraints about what they are alleging about other individuals, groups, media sources, or events.
- The algorithm that drives many YouTube videos, twitter feeds and TikTok, creates, sustains or inflames the biases or fears of many internet users.
- The rise of the Internet and the manipulation of its media and platforms for the purposes of greed, political power and consumerism, have turned disinformation campaigns into wars on political, cultural and scientific events. These wars are mostly between verified or verifiable information and disinformation, misinformation or other forms of false information.
- Other themes in the Age of Disinformation include the notion of false equivalences (that all opinions are equally valid, whether grounded or not), the denigration of scientific knowledge and expertise as alternate opinions, the mobilization of misinformation and disinformation as a vehicle for partisan attacks in the culture wars and toxic individualism that denigrates any notion of a common or public good.
- All opinions are equally valid. Posting any such opinions on the internet seems to imply that they have the same weight, even though the adherents of that position can be as low as one. Yet these proponents believe the loudest opinion is the one that deserves attention whether or not they are founded on evidence, reason or logic.
- It has become an age of arrogant ignorance, where the opinions of those without experience, training, skills in research, expertise or knowledge claim that their opinion is as valid as those with training, skills, knowledge or expertise.
- What is particularly challenging is understanding is how there are two general groups of Americans in the polarized society: those engulfed in a closed propaganda feedback loop that live in an alternate reality and those that are not, ones that are willing to learn, to change and to grow.

- The ultimate point of disinformation is to promote discord from any side to destabilize democracies, whether here or abroad, so make way for authoritarian rule. The trolls often promote different positions on an issue, to create dissonance throughout.
- One of the results of the Enlightenment is individualism that has now turned into a toxic form. We are forced to make decisions for what sources are reliable and we become the sole arbiter of reality, much like Descartes decided about the truth of the whole of the world. In the past, we had community knowledge (second-hand knowledge) embedded in our decisions based on orthodox authorities. All of these are summarily discarded. We are information silos, but connected to an ecology that dictates our behavior.