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 seems to elude his understanding. Unfortunately, there appear to be many areas of ignorance among the American populace: civics, American history, world affairs and leaders, geography. While the research is a dated but still relevant, Andrew Romano in "How Ignorant are Americans?" explains areas of ignorance of Americans and why it is the case (Romano, 2011).

- 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 it is not the complete story.

- 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 as getting the time of a movie wrong, or a false rumor, such as frequently appears on Facebook: It was claimed that an 11-year old girl was raped by a group of Muslim Refugees in Germany (Fisher & Taub, 2019, February 12). There was no basis for this rumor or, in an extension of that rumor, that the police were involved in a cover-up.

- 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, one person in two 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 yard work and you reply that you were working on mowing the grass, this may be accurate, but if you were 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, despite 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. The publication is against their will, and often deliberately distorts the meaning of that private information. As 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 played a fundamental role in her electoral defeat.

   Another example of doxing is a 2014 GamerGate controversy, in which a woman, Zoe Quinn, was harassed over a text-based game that she developed, called *Depression Quest*, based on her experiences with depression. Other gamers thought that the game was a disincentive to the profession and decided to seek retaliation by posting her name, address, phone number, and other personal details, such as an ex-boyfriend's claims about her affairs with five other men. The last detail then developed into a conspiracy theory, maligning her reputation. It became such an extreme threat that she had to leave her home (Hathaway, 2014).

- 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 characterized 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: 'fake news' threat to media; editorial decisions, outside actors at fault, 2018).   This lesson takes 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 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). Such claims are false. This taxonomy of the varieties of false information may not be complete, but it covers most cases available in current media.

Claire Wardle of FirstDraftNews.com provides a taxonomy of distinct content types of fake news, which includes both disinformation (with the clear intent to deceive) and misinformation. These are:

- fabricated content (false content designed to do harm); imposter content (false information purported to come from a genuine source);

- misleading content (using information to frame an issue or individual deceptively);

- manipulated content (taking credible information and changing or arranging them to deliberately mislead);

- false context (taking credible information out of context);

- false connection (when headlines or visuals do not support the content of a site); and

- satire or parody (the content is not to be taken seriously but humorously or satirically) (pp. 12-13).

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., its 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.