

How should we (including social media companies and governments) respond to the fact that misinformation (e.g. about coronavirus) can be harmful (and even cost lives) while recognising the value of free expression (including online)?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a landmark moment in recent history, altering society in ways which we cannot yet fully comprehend in addition to ravaging the lives of almost six million (as of January 2022). Perhaps a more pernicious effect of the coronavirus has been the deluge of “misinformation” that has been spread regarding the virus - an issue which has largely been facilitated by social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter. Though some of this information is harmless “myth”, much of the misinformation infiltrating our perception has been profit-driven and potentially harmful, both physically and politically. It may seem an attractive prospect to respond to the effects of misinformation by stopping it at its source and completely restricting that which can be said on social media; however, this blatantly violates one of our fundamental human rights - freedom of expression. As such, this essay aims to evaluate potential responses to misinformation which maintain such freedoms while holding at its forefront the paramountcy of truth in a world where it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish.

“Misinformation” is an overarching term which encompasses all inaccurate information, regardless of intention. “Disinformation” however is a subset of misinformation which specifically focuses on inaccurate information spread with the deliberate intention to deceive recipients - ethically, this is extremely problematic. The primary sources of misinformation can often be commercialised websites which prey on the “attention economy” in order to make money. The “attention economy”, a term coined by Herbert A. Simon, implies that websites aim to grab our attention with shocking content while simultaneously earning money from the multitude of adverts which smother their sites. This natural attraction towards shocking content can be seen as a reflection of our biological instincts which force us to be extremely alert to potential dangers.

Misinformation and mass propagation have always been a threat to society at its greatest times of struggle; previous to the current coronavirus, misinformation was also

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prominent during the HIV virus in which some believed it was a bioweapon created by the United States. However, what distinguishes the spread of misinformation during the coronavirus pandemic is the prevalence of social media and the subsequent power yielded to whomever may choose to publish information on these sites. In addition to the wider public, misinformation has been published by politicians such as Donald Trump, who utilised the social media platform Twitter in October 2020 to state that the coronavirus is “far less lethal” than flu - a factually incorrect statement. Blatant misinformation such as this had huge impact due to being published by one of the most influential political figures at the time, demonstrates truth being manipulated for political advantage. We cannot attempt to distort that which has its sole purpose in remaining fixed - truth cannot become blue and red, when its nature is black and white.

With regards to coronavirus, misinformative theories (sometimes called “conspiracy theories”) have included the virus being a bioweapon; that the vaccine is really a 5G chip and even that the whole pandemic is a hoax. These theories regarding coronavirus are not unique to previous conspiracy theories - they offer a comprehensible explanation for an unprecedented phenomenon by perceiving faux-patterns. The apparent “truth” which they offer conveys one much simpler than reality and as such is psychologically desirable for those who perceive it. In addition to the rise of social media, the extreme popularity of coronavirus-related conspiracy theories can be explained by the following: firstly, the lack of an easily intelligible reason for the virus’ emergence and secondly due to the mass craving for truth regarding that which has trapped the population within the perimeter of their own homes. Such theories do not only pose a threat to the individuals who directly perceive them but more generally are distorting the very principle upon which society must be based: truth.

Since the development of Plato’s tripartite theory of knowledge, truth has been widely accepted by philosophers as a fundamental component required for knowledge. There is some debate however about how truth can be defined, two theories dominate this discussion: coherence theory and correspondence theory. The correspondence theory of truth posits that a proposition is *true* if and only if it aligns with the way the world actually is;

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moreover, truth consists in a correspondence between belief and reality. Coherence theory however suggests that a proposition is *true* if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs. The problem with this theory, which is identified by Russell in his *Problems of Philosophy*, is the ambiguity of the term “coherence” and that we cannot suggest one “system of beliefs” to necessarily be the correct one. **As such**, this essay shall take the concept of “truth” to denote that which corresponds **with** reality as this allows us to maintain an externally verifiable element to our worldly beliefs. With regards to misinformation, we can now understand how utterly detrimental such distortion of truth is to our connection with external reality. If we are unable to distinguish true information from false information, the essential nature of truth is nullified as the connection with reality is no longer possible. Having established truth as the core issue at play here, we must now turn to how we can combat its distortion in a way which simultaneously recognises the right to freedom of expression.

H.L. Mencken once said that: “for every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong.” In the “complex” case of misinformation, this “simple” answer seems to be the complete government censorship of misinformation on social media; a solution which is partnered with numerous ethical issues. Freedom of expression is a vital human right which government censorship would, in a **semi-authoritarian manner**, seem to violate by restricting (what is seen as) political speech regarding coronavirus. This amalgamation between factual speech regarding coronavirus and political speech is a problem which further complicates the censorship of misinformation; if misinformation is aligned with a particular political stance then the suppression of said information can be seen as a **direct political attack**. By lending the powers of complete censorship to the government, we not only yield politicians excessive power but we once again confuse politics with truth. Moreover, the necessary removal of misinformation from social media must be done by an independent, non-government organisation (in order to maintain political neutrality). This removal of misinformation would indeed uphold laws regarding freedom of expression due to the second clause of Article 10 of the UK Human Rights Act which states

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that freedom of expression can legitimately be restricted “in the interests of... public safety... protection of health or morals” (among other reasons). The unprecedented nature of the pandemic, and the way in which misinformation regarding it can be dangerous of course warrants such “protection of health”. Additionally, such restriction of freedom of expression would be in accordance with J.S. Mill’s harm principle, which can be summarised in the phrase “your freedom to swing your first ends where my nose begins”. Moreover, we are free to do whatever we like as long as by enacting such freedoms we do not harm others; freedom to express misinformation on social media indeed results in harm and subsequently must be tackled.

Having examined the importance of preserving truth (with respect to coronavirus), it seems logical that we must do all that is possible to combat its natural opposite - falsehood. Falsehood in itself is not always dangerous (i.e. telling a “white lie”), but misinformation regarding a pandemic can have dangerous ramifications, such as preventing people from getting vaccinated and consequently costing lives. As such, it is necessary to actively inhibit the spread of such falsehoods on social media platforms by flagging misinformative content. As previously mentioned, this is not to be done by governments (due to their political connotations) and it also does not seem that this should be done by social media companies (as otherwise the inevitable question will be raised - ‘who will guard the guards?’). Thus, it follows that we should consider the creation of an independent anti-misinformation group, whose sole purpose is to proactively flag misleading information regarding coronavirus. Such a group would flag scientifically incorrect information about the virus to users (but would not categorically remove it) and would explain why the information was wrong in addition to links to the alternative scientific explanation - ideally phrased in an accessible manner. Moreover, the group would not directly infringe upon freedom of expression but would merely monitor and combat factually incorrect, potentially dangerous speech about coronavirus.

I end with a quote from J.S. Mill: “The good sword of truth will get rusty if it is not challenged by a falsehood”. Although we must concede that misinformation in itself is inherently harmful, by actively challenging it in its most dangerous manifestation we allow

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ourselves to sharpen the “sword of truth” upon which our connection with reality relies. The coronavirus must not be given the perfect conditions to thrive - a fragmented populus. A pandemic requires society to unite under common notions of truth rather than to become defeated by our human tendency to confuse truth with falsehood. The proposed solution of an independent anti-misinformation authority allows the dangers of falsehood to be combated yet upholds the importance of our **democratic** right to freedom of expression. The rise in social media has opened up a “**Pandora’s box**” of misinformation, with our only remaining semblance of hope as truth.

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