

Tomás Guarna

27 April 2021

Some notes on “Misinformation”

In this short report, I’ll be analyzing the “[Misinformation](#)” Wikipedia article.

“Misinformation” has versions in English and 12 more languages. I was surprised that, for example, Portuguese is on the list, while other European languages like German, French, or Spanish are missing. I dived into this question. The English “Misinformation” article starts with a notice saying “Not to be confused with Disinformation or Misinformation effect.” I opened the “[Disinformation](#)” article, which referred to a specific subset of misinformation referring to “false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive”. Unsurprisingly, this had a version in Spanish, “[Desinformación](#)”. I realize this is the case because in Spanish there is no word for misinformation: we only have “desinformación”, which is used as a translation of both misinformation and disinformation. However, the “Desinformación” article clearly referred to disinformation, not misinformation: “La desinformación, también llamada manipulación informativa o manipulación mediática, es información falsa o engañosa que se difunde deliberadamente para engañar”. It nested it as a subset of “información falsa” (false information), linked to a Wikipedia page which, unsurprisingly, does not exist.

It is interesting to explore the relationship between the English articles “Misinformation” and “Disinformation”. “Disinformation” includes a thorough historical account of the phenomenon, considering cases in different countries. However, “Misinformation” (a more conceptually inclusive term) has just a small historical section, and the bulk of the article refers to misinformation in the information age. Likewise, “Disinformation” includes mostly sources from scholarship of history, political science, and international security. In contrast,

“Misinformation” mostly draws from scholarship of communications, informational sciences, media studies, as well as numerous news sources. Journal articles are more prevalent in “Misinformation”, probably because of the circulation dynamics in the discipline.

It is worth considering that the “Misinformation” article provides specific interpretations of reality. For example: “Misinformation has the power to sway public elections and referendums if it has the chance to gain enough momentum in the public discourse. Leading up to the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum, for example, a figure widely circulated by the Vote Leave campaign claimed the UK would save £350 million a week by leaving the EU, and that the money would be redistributed to the British National Health Service. This was later deemed a "clear misuse of official statistics" by the UK statistics authority. (qted. 59)”. Here, the authors of this article made the deliberate decision to validate the UK statistics authority as a generator of truth, versus the Vote Leave. Wikipedia has a valuable role in providing reliable encyclopedic information -- however, it is important for their readers to understand that these editorializing decisions are being made. To restate, I am not arguing that the Vote Leave campaign has a point, but that we should be aware that some sources are privileged over others, as should be.

Another consideration is that the case studies in the English “Misinformation” article refer to the United States and the United Kingdom. While the English article essentially targets American and British readers, in truth, the English Wikipedia, English being our contemporary “lingua franca”, serves a larger purpose. International readers of the English version of Wikipedia should be mindful of these global biases.

Cited works

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