Arbiters of Truth

Description

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Within the last five years, disinformation and misinformation have become part of our common vernacular. Unfortunately, these terms are often misunderstood, misused, or even used interchangeably. Clarifying definitions are critical in a world of increasingly high-stakes information sharing, and this is of particular importance for information professionals.

—True information may be a unicorn.—

Information is processed data, organized and structured to enable decision making. Information, at the root, has no inherent truth or falsehood. Humans provide the context of that information and for themselves the validity of information.

Misinformation is information that is unintentionally mistaken, inaccurate, or false information that one party believes to be true. We see misinformation often communicated as partial information, misattributed information, or information that is simply misunderstood.

Disinformation is information used to intentionally manipulate, mislead, or create a false narrative. Commonly, this might be encountered as lies, propaganda, or manipulated information.
Malinformation is the deliberate release of information to the public with the aim of doing harm or intimidating a person or a group. Examples of malinformation include doxing, revenge porn, and information intentionally taken out of context.

True information may be a unicorn. It is difficult for information to remain true from start to finish when it is shared—even with the best intention—because it is filtered through the individuals’ perceptions. An example is genetic information (traits, DNA) that is conveyed from one generation to the next through our genes and is not filtered through any beliefs or perceptions.

**Communicating Information**

In today’s information age, sending and receiving information is not as simple as it once was when our main source of information was a trusted local newspaper or friend. We are inundated with information from an enormous number of sources that are providing information. Distributed information is always influenced by intent, context, and social noise.

Intent is a messenger’s goal or purpose in sharing the message. The purpose can be simply to share a particular message, or it might be to mislead with harmful intent. Intent can range from benevolently sharing a piece of information, with an indifference to truth, to swaying the receiver toward a particular opinion.
Context includes the events, ideas, time, and conditions under which information is created and affects how messages are sent and received. The context of a message is important because circumstances surrounding the message help determine and clarify the meaning of information. When messages are taken out of context, the meaning can easily be mis construed or misunderstood. Clarity about the original context of information is critical for both senders and receivers.

Social noise is the influence of personal and relational factors on information received which can confuse, distort, or even change the meaning of a message. Influenced by social noise, individuals may adjust their response to information based on social cues or concerns regarding how they present themselves to others in their social network. Social noise can cause us to send or receive information that is skewed due to the pressure of social compliance with a particular narrative (current events, or historical).

Sharing information is much more complex in the information age. Intent, context, and social noise affect every message sent. The sender has a role in self-assessment of the truthfulness of information as they determine why and how the information should be shared with others. The receiver interprets the message, assesses the truthfulness of it, and determines how to act upon it. On both sides of this process, intent, context, and social noise influence our understanding and judgements. In this sense, truth is in the eye of the beholder.

We are the arbiters of truth. The implications of this are small when we share information one-on-one; however, it becomes exponentially larger when we communicate digitally via social media. Sharing information via social media has implications that are orders of magnitude larger than a personal conversation. Each of us must be careful to think critically about what information we believe, respond to, or share. We are all arbiters of truth who judge the reliability and validity of each piece of information we encounter.