Coming to Grips with Life in the Disinformation Age

"The Information Age" is the term given to post-World War II contemporary society, particularly from the Sixties, onward, when we were coming to the realization that our ability to publish information of all kinds, fact and fiction, was increasing at an exponential rate so as to make librarians worry that they would soon run out of storage space. Their storage worries were temporarily allayed by the advent of the common use of microform analog photography of printed materials, and eventually further by digital technology and nanotechnology. It is noted that in this era, similar to other past eras of great growth in communications technology such as written language, the printing press, analog recording, and telecommunication, dramatic changes occurred as well in human thinking and socialness. More ready archiving negatively impacted our disposition to remember things by rote, including, in recent times, our own phone numbers. Moreover, many opportunities for routine socializing were lost, particularly those involving public speech and readings, live music and theater, live visits to neighbors and friends, etc.

The recognition that there had been a significant tradeoff from which there seemed to be no turning back evoked discussion of how to come to grips with "life in the Information Age". Perhaps we could discover new social and intellectual opportunities from our technological advances to replace the old ones lost, ways made available by new technology.

Today we are facing a new challenge, also brought on largely by new technology: that of coming to grips with life in the "Disinformation Age". In this case, the new opportunities emerging are clearly nefarious, so if turning back the clock is out of the question, as it seems to be, then finding a way effectively to combat this new onslaught against human community and humane sensibility is vital to our chances for peace and human happiness.

Although the Information Age and the Disinformation Age are linked superficially by growth stemming from advances in communications technology, in other respects they are quite distinct. Whereas the former is an inevitable result of technological advance, the latter is not, but rather is based on the invention of specific policies preexisting these technological advances and only lately experiencing a contagious worldwide spread of activity fed by those advances. Its origins in invented policies of destructive social engineering that require specific, continual training and cultivated discipline to carry out and requiring financial backing to boot suggest that disinformation culture, unlike information culture, is not an inevitable aspect of contemporary culture that we will just have to get used to but something we can, with patience, shirk off. The way to do so is not by counterargument or point-by-point criticism – which is what the purveyors of Disinformation seek , but by direct public exposure of it as sham speech, by legislating specifically and prosecuting against its specific techniques as inimical to free speech, rather than as just more bad protected speech we must tolerate.

To be sure, practices rooted in policies invented at a certain time may have examples occurring before that time scattered throughout human history. Although capitalism began to exist as a theory of economic management in the Enlightenment era, in some respects the practice of capitalism is ancient, to be found in bits and pieces at various places and times, though not as a deliberately sustained disciplined practice. So, too, disinformation campaigns can be seen as occurring here and there at various times in human history, but not as deliberate, standing policy.

To be clear on what disinformation is requires us first to disabuse ourselves of its likely characterization as if on a journalistic spectrum at the opposite extreme from top-notch, unbiased reporting, i.e. as just really bad journalism, or even the worst possible journalism. The notion behind this is that since we are all saddled with biases, it takes journalistic expertise to keep bias out of reporting. Good journalism does this better, while bad journalism does this worse. Hence, the worst possible journalism earns the designation of "disinformation". In between top-notch journalism and disinformation, we would find, according to this characterization heading from best to worst, first, sloppy but honest journalism, whose inaccuracies are due to negligence and perhaps a sensationalist bias, then down to journalism tainted by political and social prejudices of various kinds, then political or commercial advocacy, and finally down through crass propaganda to "fake news".

The inventors and purveyors of disinformation would love for us to continue to see disinformation in this misguided way, for it will facilitate their ability to play one of their favorite games and relativize the entire spectrum, insisting that one reasonable person might just as easily see the directional arrow of best-to-worst news accuracy as pointed in the opposite direction, hence creating a permanent place for disinformation as a component of free speech.

In fact, disinformation is not a kind of news or a kind of journalism at all. Nor is it to be likened to crass propaganda, not even of the kind Joseph Goebbels famously practiced; nor to political campaigning; nor to commercial advertising and the like; nor to just plain prejudice or bias.

Although Goebbels' efforts as Minister of Propaganda during Germany's Third Reich were part of the Nazi Party's warring campaign, the propaganda itself was not in a technical sense destructive *per se*, but constructive: constructive of a world-view that would motivate Germans to fall in with the Nazi agenda. Yes, propaganda did aim to instill hatred, but it did so according to the propaganda style of what Goebbels himself considered the world's greatest propaganda machine: Hollywood. Goebbels' disrespect of the United States of America most notably excluded Hollywood, which he worshipped and adored. In particular, he admired how good Hollywood was at instilling hatred and the like in ways so seemingly kind and friendly. This kind of deception is based almost entirely on selective denial, so that all the facts presented can be verified, while the audience's own implicit biases could be counted on to supply the "suspension of disbelief" in the otherwise conspicuous absence of the facts suppressed. Since this kind of propaganda seeks to avoid fabrication at all costs, it does not require much field work and is inexpensive to maintain.

In contrast, disinformation is not based on construction, but destruction alone, with fabrication as one of its most common techniques. It thus involves more research and fieldwork, as will be discussed below.

Disinformation is sometimes also mischaracterized as akin to the kind of deception involved in political campaigning or commercial advertising, only more extreme. But there is a key difference: both political campaigning and commercial advertising, although morally controversial in their propensity to manipulate and deceive, exist within the social contract as games we play and allow to be played for the purpose of achieving a social good for the benefit

of society. Some of the things we do in the context of games – like punching a person in a boxing match - would be immoral or even illegal outside the game context, and the game context justifies it only on the grounds that the game has been judged as permissible since it supplies an important benefit to society. Now, although we may disagree on which games are beneficial and which are not – some people, for example, think boxing should be illegal – we accept our task of moral deliberation to regard the game as a whole and not the individual actions within that game. If a boxer boxing legally kills his opponent, we do not consider him guilty, although we might push for boxing to be banned or at least further regulated.

Similarly, the complaints we have about campaigning and advertising regard its excesses. We know that there is a purpose for campaigning and advertisement and that we cannot expect campaigners or advertisers to be telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; but we expect them to "play" within certain bounds. In particular, we expect them, say, to tell the truth when asked specific factual questions, and not to fabricate.

In contrast, disinformation is not a constructive social game that is sometimes overplayed, but fundamentally an act of war seeking only to destroy. In fact, its aim is the destruction of social alliances and community alienation in the camp of one's opponent.

Finally, disinformation is sometimes misguidedly seen to be a mere side-effect of bias. Since we are all vulnerable to bias, one might go on from this to blithely assume that in some way or other we are all practitioners of disinformation. I can hear the slogan now: "one man's disinformation is another man's truth".

In fact, disinformation, unlike bias, is the reflectively deliberate dissemination of false information. In contrast, my own biases deceive me first and foremost, then others secondarily, in the form of my bias-affected communications.

Having distinguished disinformation from what it is not puts us in position to specify just what it is.

The term 'disinformation' itself did not enter the English language until the 80's. This is telling. Its etymology is from the Russian '*dezinformatsiya*' a term coined by Stalin in 1923 when he opened a "special disinformation office". Reportedly, he gave it what to the Russian ear was a French-sounding name to insinuate that this was something already practiced in the West, and that the Soviets needed now to master it in self-defense. Stalin's intent for the use of disinformation, previous to his coinage known as "black propaganda", was to destroy and demoralize the culture and morale of the enemy, exploiting and driving wedges into divisions among them, and bringing about social and political alienation, thus weakening government. This eventually coalesced into the Russian motto characterizing disinformation in terms of the 4D's: dismiss, distort, distract, dismay.

In 1952, in the midst of the Cold War, The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* unapologetically defined 'disinformation' as "false information with the intention to deceive public opinion".

As the Soviet Union itself began to weaken during the 80's key informants brought the details of this practice to the notice of American political leadership, and soon its tactics began to be integrated into American campaign strategies. By 1990, disinformation culture was pervasive in U.S. politics. Prior to this, its only noteworthy use had been enemy state vs enemy state.

Unlike classic propaganda campaigns, the techniques of disinformation chiefly involve the tactic of fabrication, both *ex nihilo* and in the form of forged or tainted documents and recordings. It also includes the spread of or threat to spread "malinformation", which is true information which ordinary journalistic standards would deem inappropriate for dissemination due to privacy considerations.

Also key to understanding disinformation is that it is alternately called "Active Measures". This is because, unlike passive spying, which involves covert penetration of communities and institutions to obtain information, disinformation penetrates not to obtain information but to disseminate in a targeted manner carefully crafted falsehoods designed to sow division. These projects are typically labor-intensive, ongoing, involve much planning, and increasingly pursue narrowcasting over broadcasting strategies of deployment.

Lest conservatives gloat that "they told us so" many years ago that the Soviets had been infiltrating our social movements going all the way back to Stalin, assuming that those infiltrations were all of left-leaning groups. In fact, disinformation campaigns, only seeking to increase division and hatred within the targeted culture, can just as easily target the right as the left. The most recent successfully prosecuted Russian disinformation campaign in the States involves the wildly successful infiltration of the NRA by Russian operative Mariia Valeryevna Butina (convicted April 26, 2019). She was not a spy in the classical sense, as if here to gather secret information, but simply to fans the flames of social alienation within the membership and particularly the leadership of the NRA, planting false stories, narratives, etc., presumably leading to more divisive politics and congressional gridlock in the U.S.

Whereas disinformation had begun to wane in Russia for a few decades with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, around that same time it began to flourish in American politics. In recent times it has come back in full force in Russia and in many other, mostly non-democratic countries, due the new "growth opportunities" afforded by emerging technologies.

Disinformation has become a dictator's best friend. It has been particularly effective at destabilizing and weakening democratic movements and democratic political processes. It is scary to think how ordinary disinformation culture has become for us here in the United States. What we need to do is not allow ourselves to grow inured to it, to consider it inevitable, or that its practitioners are practicing it non-reflectively or unwittingly. Disinformation is a destructive act of war. Practice against one's own country or against legitimate institutions within our country is anti-patriotic, possibly rising to acts of treason. It is an act of violence, not of free speech. Unlike even biased speech, it is not an act of speech at all, any more than a fake house is a kind of house. We should by all means consider it as outside the reach of things to be tolerated for the sake of liberty.

One important *caveat* to the marching orders just given is that practitioners of disinformation seek out unwitting carriers to disseminate their messages. Such persons, typically reeled in on account of biases that made them vulnerable to be exploited, are not themselves practicing disinformation but are mere stooges in the disinformation process. Although we might take them to task for their biases, we should not mistake them for deliberate participants in disinformation.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What is the difference between Disinformation and propaganda more generically?

2. How has the internet age made disinformation campaigns easier and less expensive to carry out?

3. What must we do to combat disinformation, as opposed to combatting genuine speech that is biased?