

# Information Matters: Misinformation and Disinformation

If you've been paying attention to the national discourse at all, you're probably familiar with the terms "misinformation" and "disinformation". Often these terms are used interchangeably, but they are in fact distinct and the difference matters.

**Misinformation** is false or inaccurate information.

In other words, misinformation is the kind of thing that happens when someone, without realizing or intending to, makes a mistake and says one thing, when they should have said something else. In practice, misinformation can be harmless (e.g., if I tell you it's taco day when in fact it's lasagna day) or it can be harmful (e.g., if I claim that someone is a thief when in fact they aren't), but in any case, it's not intentional.

**Disinformation** is false or misleading information that is spread with the deliberate intent to deceive.

Why would someone knowingly spread false information? Disinformation, it turns out, can be used in a number of very powerful ways. It can be used to hide the truth or shape public opinion. It can also be used more indirectly as a means to overwhelm us or to sow confusion and division.

The different ends to which disinformation can be put give us insight into who might employ disinformation and why. Historically, governments have been the main purveyors of disinformation in the world, using it at home to maintain stability and public support, and against other countries to create instability and internal division.

With the rise of social media, however, non-governmental entities, and even individuals in some cases, can act as powerful sources of disinformation. Here, the goal is usually political gain and/or profit.

In the abstract, it's easy to draw clear distinctions between information (true), misinformation (false, but unintentionally so), and disinformation (intentionally false). In real life, however, it's not hard for the lines to become blurred. For example, it's easy to imagine how a piece of information (true), is deliberately altered and then shared as disinformation (intentionally false), landing in the social media feed of someone who, believing it to be real (because, after all, it started as information), unwittingly passes it on as misinformation (unintentionally false).

This dynamic presents a particular difficulty for democracy, which, as a form of government, depends on our subscribing to a more or less shared sense of reality. There is really only one solution to the problems presented by misinformation and disinformation, and that's an informed citizenry capable of separating substance from hype, fact from fiction, for themselves. Building these important civic skills is the work of this newsletter. Keep reading to learn more...