

# Information Matters: Disinformation and Its Origins

In our last installment of Information Matters, we focused on the distinction between misinformation and disinformation. In the process, we also briefly touched on where misinformation and disinformation come from and what might motivate an organization or individual to engage to spread them.

In this installment, recognizing its unintentional nature, let's set aside the question of misinformation and focus on the trickier question of disinformation, who/what is behind it, and how it manages to trick us into believing it.

Looking at the sheer variety of disinformation we are subject to on a daily basis (e.g., about healthcare, politics, education, climate, gender, race, religion, etc.), it quickly becomes clear that all kinds of people engage in all manner of disinformation for all sorts of reasons. In some cases, disinformation is put out by people looking to scam or make money off us. In other cases, it's clearly the work of people promoting an ideology of some sort. But perhaps the largest share of disinformation falls into a third category where the question of exactly who is driving it and why can be much harder to settle.

To understand this third kind of disinformation, it helps to consider the broader socio-political context in which we are living. For example, while the United States is not at war, it still has enemies around the world. Fortunately, these enemies lack the means to defeat the U.S. militarily. However, thanks in part to the openness and anonymity of the internet, they do have the very real ability to leverage some of our own internal divisions in ways that, over time, can be made to weaken American society and render it substantially less resilient.

Disinformation plays an important part in such campaigns. Our adversaries use it to sow confusion and turn us first against our government and our institutions and, eventually, turn us against one another. In the process, these

powers seek to destabilize us and at the same time create strategic geopolitical advantages for themselves.

“But wait!” you might say. “The people I read/watch/listen to on the web don’t talk in foreign languages. They don’t speak about foreign things. They can’t be working on behalf of foreign interests.”

When the sources we’re engaged with, for all intents and purposes, look, act, and sound just like us, it’s natural to assume they are Americans and the messages they’re conveying are shaped by American values (e.g., respect for human rights and freedoms, adherence to rule of law, etc.). However, even American messengers can (knowingly and unknowingly) spread foreign-driven disinformation (see, for example: [this](#)). In the internet age, where ideas have no real borders, every one of us, if we’re not careful about what we post and repost, is capable of serving as a weapon in some foreign power’s efforts to undermine America—and our enemies know it.

We will have more to say about this in the next installment of Information Matters. For now, let’s turn our attention to what makes disinformation campaigns so effective.

In part, disinformation campaigns work because they employ two important tools:

The first is **propaganda**. Propaganda entails the dissemination of biased or misleading information in service to a particular political cause or point of view.

The second is **astroturfing**. Astroturfing is the deceptive practice of presenting an orchestrated marketing or public relations scheme in the guise of an unsolicited and/or authentic grassroots campaign.

Propaganda and astroturfing are related in that both entail the intentional release of biased and self-serving “information” designed to a) mislead the public in favor of the agent putting out the “information” and b) bypass our normal democratic practices for testing new ideas.

Where they differ is in the kinds of authority they offer the false information being spread. As propaganda, disinformation seems to draw its authority from

“expertise”. Spread through astroturfing, disinformation appears to gain its believability through its “popularity” or wide-spread acceptance.

When we understand how the authority structures of propaganda and astroturfing work, we can see how, when deployed together, the strengths of each communication system serve to neutralize the weaknesses of the other. For example, even if we’re inclined to be suspicious of others’ claims of “expertise” (propaganda), we can still accept what is being pushed at us because it appears to be supported by the majority of the “grassroots” (astroturfing). Similarly, even if we’re suspicious of the “wisdom of crowds” (astroturfing), we can still accept it by allowing ourselves to be persuaded by the fact that “those in the know” seem to support it (propaganda).

Although both propaganda and astroturfing work together to reinforce our belief in the “information” being conveyed, the belief itself remains false and the support on which it relies remains dishonest and contrived in every case.