

How You can Fight Truth Decay!
GPUUC Summer Service, July 28, 2024

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Introduction

Truth Decay is a terrible disease, and it is spreading.

It starts in the mouth, when you repeat something you saw on the web that sounded interesting but possibly false, and you pass that interesting bit of news along to someone else. Truth decay is a communicable disease - so you need to watch out to avoid spreading it to your associates. This transmission of the disease, without intent to mislead, has been called “misinformation.”

You can also easily catch truth decay as well. If you have any unfilled cavities they can easily be filled with tiny untruths that can grow to become full-fledged truth decay – often without even realizing it. Many people go for years either unaware that their beliefs are false – Or – they just live with them, acting as if they were true. The only way to get rid of them is to drill them out and fill with a simple compound: Truth!

Now, you may not be aware of this, but there are actually people who go around generating truth decay material and infecting their victims. Such a victim may be unaware of the infection, becoming a misinformationist. However, in too many cases we find a willing recipient –a spreader – collaborating to promote truth decay. This intentional generation of truth decay has been called “disinformation.”

Falsehoods, lies, misinformation and disinformation have been around almost since people could speak. Take the Trojan Horse as an example. Was that not disinformation to present it as a gift, not revealing it was full of enemy soldiers?

However, in the last decade Truth Decay has become an epidemic. The internet, social media and active measures by governments have made disinformation a global concern. Barbara McQuade, the former federal prosecutor and MSNBC legal analyst, has spoken about this development for several years. In February of this year her book was published with the title “Attack from Within: How Disinformation is sabotaging America.”

I will use Barbara McQuade’s book “Attack from Within” as the organizing resource for this presentation. I will refer to her using her familiar name “Barb” rather than Mrs. McQuade, and will quote from her book without verbal indication <my script will show reference>. My presentation will cover the following five topics:

1. Disinformation Past: What is disinformation and how has it been used by authoritarian leaders in the past?
2. Disinformation Today: How has disinformation changed in the last decade?
3. Disinformationists: Who are the main purveyors of disinformation in the US today?
4. Disinformation on Display: What are the main stories today that would be considered disinformation?
5. Disinformation Defense: What can we do to fight the Truth Decay attributable to Disinformation?

Topic 1: Disinformation Past

Barb begins her book with a quote from Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*, from the fifth century BC: “All warfare is based on deception.” Disinformation is a form of deception, but is defined by Barb as “the deliberate use of lies to manipulate people, whether to extract profit or to advance a political agenda.” (McQuade p 5). I would point out that her definition excludes its use for military objectives, as does my presentation.

If we go back a century, we find that in 1923 “the young Soviet Union set up its first office for *dezinformatsiya*, or disinformation. (McQuade p 13) This office was in operation through the century, and in the 1980’s it propagated the false story that the US government had created the AIDS virus in a lab as a biological weapon.

Disinformation was at the heart of McCarthyism from 1950 – 1954, in which the lies of Sen. Joseph McCarthy were believed by a large segment of the country. However, he was brought down very dramatically.

When McCarthy tried to continue his attack [on a young lawyer], [the lead counsel Joseph] Welch angrily interrupted, "Let us not assassinate this lad further, senator. You have done enough. **Have you no sense of decency?**"

Overnight, McCarthy's immense national popularity evaporated. Censured by his Senate colleagues, ostracized by his party, and ignored by the press, McCarthy died three years later, 48 years old and a broken man.

Once a disinformationist is convincingly exposed, just as in the Wizard of Oz, that person’s influence can disappear overnight. Possibly this could still happen to a prominent disinformationist today. However, in this case the answer to the question “have you no decency?” is clear: No! As Barb puts it, “we are not just living in a post-truth world: we are living in a post-shame world.” (McQuade p. 6)

What are the characteristics of contemporary disinformation in this new post-truth, post-shame world?

Topic 2: Disinformation Today

In the last decade, Internet-based technologies have exponentially expanded our ability to generate and distribute disinformation – without any guardrails. I would like to share with you just one example from McQuade’s book, which illustrates several distinct factors:

Begin Quote: The message began by sounding like a routine election-season robocall. “Hi, this is Tamika Taylor,” the caller began. She said she was calling from ‘Project 1599,’ a “civil rights organization.” “Mail-in voting sounds great,” she said, “but did you know that if you vote by mail, your personal information will be part of a public database that will be used by police departments to track down old warrants and be used by credit card companies to collect outstanding debts?” The message continued, “The CDC is even pushing to use records for mail-in voting to track people for mandatory vaccines. Don’t be finessed into giving your private information to the man; stay safe and beware of vote by mail”

In fact, these calls during the 2020 election season were organized by Jack Burkman and Jacob Wohl, two white conservative operatives who deliberately targeted voters in predominantly Black communities in five states to discourage them from voting in 2020. ... <this included Michigan>

In 2022, the two men would plead guilty to communications fraud. End Quote (McQuade p. 163)

This incident demonstrates several things about disinformation. First, it appeals to hearts rather than to minds; it plays on the fears, hatreds and desires of its targets. Secondly, it used computer technology to distribute the message. While it did not use the Internet, it still used robocall technology and a database of telephone numbers – tools that were not available a few decades ago. And third, it was done with clear intent to aid one political

contender by reducing the number of votes to his opponent. A fourth irony is that the target audience would be helping elect a candidate supported by many white nationalists – who hate the black community.

Topic 3: Disinformationists

Who are the main purveyors of disinformation in the US today? The top disinformationists I would highlight in the US today are: Russia, China, individuals and groups within the political right that include a significant number of Christian fundamentalists, and a single individual who really cannot be omitted from the list: Donald J. Trump – or, to use his family’s original German name, Donald Drumpf.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/us/politics/donald-drumpf-a-funny-label-but-is-it-fair.html> (NYT March 2016)

Russia’s activities are massive and effective. In the past they have tended to promote Trump, but their overall objective is to generate distrust of American democratic institutions and weaken US society. It would be revealing to review specific cases of Russian disinformation practice, but this would take a while. This Russian threat may be best summed up by a quote from the US Army War College: “Russia will dominate information warfare if the United States does not treat disinformation as central to Russian strategy.”

<https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/News/Display/Article/3789933/understanding-russian-disinformation-and-how-the-joint-force-can-address-it/>

As extensive and provocative as Russian disinformation is, it will likely be exceeded long-term by the multi-billion-dollar Chinese program. China’s gross domestic product is seven and a half times that of Russia, and it is approaching its disinformation strategy with a deliberate and long-range view. CNN reports that “China is using the world’s largest known online disinformation operation to harass Americans...”

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/13/us/china-online-disinformation-invs/index.html> - Nov. 2023

Begin quote: The onslaught of attacks – often of a vile and deeply personal nature – is part of a well-organized, increasingly brazen Chinese government intimidation campaign targeting people in the United States....

Known as “Spamouflage” or “Dragonbridge,” the network’s hundreds of thousands of accounts spread across every major social media platform have not only harassed Americans who have criticized the Chinese Communist Party, but have also sought to discredit US politicians, disparage American companies at odds with China’s interests and hijack online conversations around the globe that could portray the CCP in a negative light. End quote.

Much more could be said about Chinese activities, and I would encourage you to be on the lookout for instances where Chinese disinformation may be suspected.

With regard to domestic disinformationist individuals and organizations, I would like to reference a publication titled “The Disinformation Age,” available for download as a 302 page PDF file from the Social Science Research Council (ssrc.org), an organization founded in 1923 that is highly regarded.

<https://www.ssrc.org/publications/the-disinformation-age-politics-technology-and-disruptive-communication-in-the-united-states/> (Editors: W. Lance Benett and Steven Livingston)

In that publication many of the domestic producers of Truth Decay are described, highlighting the role of wealthy donors who founded or promote media sites that may generate disinformation. These include (p. 46):

Koch family	Multiple organizations; among the most influential actors,
Rupert Murdoch	Fox News,
Julian Sinclair	Sinclair Broadcasting,
PragerU	fracking billionaires Dan and Farris Wilks. (Ask if anyone has heard of PragerU)

In a January 25, 2024, article, the New York Times has added the name of Elon Musk, now owner of Twitter rebranded as X.

Begin quote. "Since taking control of the site, Mr. Musk has dismantled the platform's system for flagging false election content, arguing it amounted to election interference." End quote.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/us/politics/elon-musk-election-misinformation-x-twitter.html>

It would be inaccurate to claim that each of the resources above promotes disinformation in all cases, but specific publications may be identified as Truth Decay. For instance, Fox News promoted the false story that Dominion voting machines were faulty, resulting in a \$ 787 m settlement for defaming the company. Another case is described by Barb that I would assert is clearly disinformational: "when Trump was charged in the classified documents case, Fox showed Biden above a graphic that read, 'WANNABE DICTATOR SPEAKS AT THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER HAVING HIS POLITICAL RIVAL ARRESTED.'" Some may assert that this was not disinformational, but it sure looks to me like Truth Decay.

With regard to the truthfulness of one prominent individual, Mr. Trump, it seems to me that his record is quite clear. In Barb's book on disinformation, his name appears 65 times in the index. Examples abound: The big 2020 election lie, Climate Hoax, COVID will magically disappear. Presidential historian Michael Beschloss has stated:

"I have never seen a president in American history who has lied so continuously and so outrageously as Donald Trump, period."

I am continually shocked by this circumstance. I would never have believed that the American people would tolerate a leader so divorced from the truth in thought, speech and action.

Topic 4: Disinformation on Display

What are the main stories today that would be considered disinformation? I will mention only a few, and as time permits, I would like to have an interactive dialogue about these and others you feel are most significant:

Creationism

The "Big Lie" about the 2020 federal election having been stolen

The harm of vaccines

The Climate Hoax

Topic 5: Disinformation Defense

What can we as a society and as individuals do to fight the Truth Decay of Disinformation?

Barb has a number of proposals to combat disinformation as a society. However, she makes the following point: "Combating disinformation is a massive undertaking, and defeating it will require the kind of empathy I saw in Ireland" (with regard to that country's vote on abortion). This will require dialogue and understanding between two sides of any argument – something that will be personally hard for me, as I have found it about impossible to discuss disinformation with people who feel it is not disinformation. But we all must try to see the other side – I hope you can do this easier than I can.

Her more specific proposals distinguish between supply side and demand side measures. Supply side measures in the US must recognize our First Amendment rights to free speech, which disallow measures already being taken in the EU and UK, such as the Digital Services Act that allows governments to remove "illegal" content. Among her suggestions is to amend Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which gives immunity to Internet service providers; to regulate online publishers like other industries; prohibit anonymous users and bots – ensuring that disinformation or any content providers are identifiable; require disclosure of funding sources; extend the fairness

doctrine with its 'equal time' rule to online media, and other measures which necessarily require some form of regulation – all this in a climate in which increased regulation is difficult.

Barb's demand side measures include conducting public service campaigns similar in effect to Mothers Against Drunk Driving; use of and improvement of online tools such as "ClaimBuster" and "botometer" that use various means including AI to discern if an online story is accurate; promote civic engagement to get people away from their online games and actually interact with others in society.

Barb also asserts that we should demand leaders who speak the truth – but we have already seen that, at the moment, the country as a whole is not committed to this goal.

With regard to personal actions, I would advocate the following:

Absolutely the first step in researching any story or topic is to see if it is reported in Wikipedia. This resource has been found to approach Encyclopedia Britannica in its accuracy, and to be far broader in its coverage. I have attended two North American Wikipedia conferences, and it is a worldwide phenomenon supported by well-intentioned individuals and institutions. It has not yet become a victim of Truth Decay, but vigilance is warranted. If anyone sees content on Wikipedia that you feel is not true, please look up how to report this to the parent entity, Wikimedia, as they are quite good at tracking down abuse or inaccuracy. Furthermore, if you know the truth of the matter, you can edit the page yourself!

I would mention good resources for checking truth in media. One is the Snopes web service, which rates articles with a metric that includes 20 different stages of truthfulness. (snopes.com and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snopes>)

Another credible resource is the Ad Fontes Media, which publishes a Media Bias Chart rating the main media outlets as to left-right political leaning but also rating each as to overall veracity. I will include the Media Bias Chart and other resources in the written version of my presentation.

<https://adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/>

I have checked with the UUA to see if it has programs to address disinformation, but as far as I can tell it does not. I have sent email in to a number of US institutions that I feel could speak out against falsehood, but they have not. I have thought about what we as a congregation could do to fight Truth Decay, but without success, so let me know if you have suggestions.

Something that John and I have discussed is the role of critical thinking in how one makes sense of the world. We feel that a program to enhance the awareness of critical thinking and to enhance critical thinking ability would go a long way to encourage people to avoid false beliefs. There is a widely used test, the Watson-Glaser assessment, to measure one's critical thinking ability, and we may find suitable courses on developing this skill. This is a topic we will be researching further, to see if an emphasis on critical thinking could be a tool in our fight against Truth Decay.

Summary and Conclusion

In this presentation I have provided a look at disinformation past and present. The script for this talk will be available after I add details about references and additional background. I will invite you to take action where you see disinformation appear, to check it out against authoritative resources, and do what you can to expose the falsehood.

It is time to unscrew the cap on your tube of TruthPaste, and get to work scrubbing!