

## The scourge of misinformation

It may seem trivial to some of you, but I'm sick and tired of people labeling what amounts to out and out lies as simple innocuous *misinformation*. And if we're going to have a serious discussion about misinformation then maybe we should first discuss the Misinformation Effect (ME). ME is a term used to describe a phenomenon that has been researched by psychologists and that occurs when misleading information is incorporated into an individual's account of a historical event such as a tragic accident.

According to an article in study.com...with ME, information can be added or changed and therefore the long-term memory of the individual will be modified, but believed to be the actual event, or recollection of the event, as it happened. Does that ring any bells with the tall tales spun by Brian Williams, former anchor of NBC News and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton who recounted stories of coming under fire from hostile forces while doing their respective jobs?

Or maybe our current President comes to mind, a man who seems particularly adept at weaving fanciful stories about having driven a semi-truck or being arrested on his way to meet with Nelson Mandela (among other fables). I'm sure that at some point most of us have embellished a story or two about our lives, especially with grandchildren on our knees, but then again...we're not an NBC anchor, a Secretary of State or the leader of the free world. We expect those people to stick to the script as it was written (and experienced) and not to run us around the corral of pulp fiction to gain either sympathy or a few more approval points. There is a public trust and not an irrevocable poetic license to fabricate, even though it might be an ME fabrication.

Real misinformation, which is usually referred to as *false or inaccurate information* about a vast range of topics, is being spread faster than the latest strain of the Coronavirus. And it may very well be equally as destructive by virtue of its long-term negative effects on our collective faith in our government and institutions. Misinformation has also infected a broader swath of people from all walks of life than the virus - many without the pre-existing condition or co-morbidity of a short memory. In fact, I cannot remember a single time in the last 50 years when so much false information has been passed off as fact by so many people in leadership positions in all three branches of government, the 'traditional' media, social media and by self-styled experts who feel no obligation to check sources and/or studies before sounding off on television shows and podcasts.

Misinformation: the life blood of scandals

One thing all scandals have in common is misinformation. It may precede the scandal, stoke its flames at critical stages or attach itself at the back end like a remora on a shark. Over the past few years, we've been fed misinformation on a variety of topics: the 'equity' and fairness of open borders, America's purported systemic racism and rampant 'White privilege', the Russians' involvement in our 2016 Presidential election, the *benefits* of free and unfettered abortions, the value of choosing our own genders, the transitory nature of inflation and the near deadly attack on our nation's Capitol building on January 6, 2020. One of the most flagrant violators of factual information dissemination is our own House of Representatives and the chairmen/chairwomen of several select committees. Many seemingly go about their work with total disregard for the truth and feel that it's their sworn duty to stop at nothing when the prospects of spreading a good lie will benefit their party.

The current January 6th Select Committee (to investigate the attack on the Capitol) is a perfect case in point. The committee has chosen to allow conjecture to take the place of facts. By refusing to release the thousands of hours of film footage of that day's events to the public they have indicated a preference for stifling the free flow of adequate - and accurate - information, proving the equation that less information promotes more misinformation. We've reached an alarming crossroads in America, a place where the average citizen is being forced to choose up sides and take a path forward that is based more on political allegiances than facts.

Why is that? It's because there is no ombudsman, no arbiter nor referee on the side of truth to throw down a red flag and suspend the game while we all view the videotape.

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