

How Can Mass Communication Research Explain Disinformation?

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the role of mass communication theories in understanding disinformation, tracing historical examples and theoretical foundations. It examines how communication technologies, initially tools for societal connection, became instruments for authoritarian control, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. Key theories by Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell, and Paul Lazarsfeld are analyzed to illustrate how mass communication manipulates public opinion, shaping pseudo-environments and reinforcing ideological cohesion. The paper emphasizes the enduring influence of opinion leaders in spreading disinformation and discusses contemporary digital challenges, including the fragmentation of public discourse and the psychological impacts of cognitive overload.

Keywords: Disinformation, Mass Communication, Authoritarian Control, Opinion Leaders, Cognitive Overload

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, new technologies such as the telegraph, radio, and press have enabled large-scale communication. While these tools indeed boosted the economic and social development of the modern world by connecting people globally, this technological revolution nonetheless created the perfect environment for authoritarian regimes to consolidate their political power, manipulate the masses, and strengthen their narratives [10].

The strategic use of the telegraph as a tool for state control strikingly illustrates the correlation between media revolutions and authoritarianism. In 19th century France, for instance, the State maintained a monopoly on telegraphic communications, emphasizing the role of these technologies as instruments of political, rather than just commercial, power. Recognizing the control of the dissemination of information to be as crucial as maintaining military dominion, governments (such as Napoleon Bonaparte's) used the telegraph as a central tool for both military and political communication [2].

Mass communication control was essential for the diffusion of authoritarian ideologies, as leaders understood that the dissemination of controlled information could ensure power maintenance and suppress dissent. The utilization of railways, steam engines, and factories, supported by the media, was crucial for empire expansion and large-scale social mobilization [10]. Furthermore, regimes like Stalin's and Hitler's justified their totalitarian systems as the only way to control the immense capacities unleashed by the Industrial Revolution.

According to Burke [2], with the advent of the radio and, later, television in the 20th century, these regimes found an even more effective way to control the masses. Totalitarian governments, such as Hitler's in Nazi Germany, and Mussolini's in Fascist Italy, intensively exploited these new technologies to disseminate propaganda and create a cult of personality. The radio, with its capacity to connect the masses in real time, allowed for the spread of Nazi and Fascist ideologies and the control of public narratives, inciting nationalism to justify acts of aggression and repression.

The impact of this transformation is evident when we observe the use that authoritarian regimes, like Hitler's,

made of mass communication. In Germany, for example, Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, skillfully exploited new communication media like radio and cinema to consolidate the power of the Nazi Party [10]. Burke [2] recounts that Goebbels was adept at using these new means of communication to solidify Nazi ideology, noting that during the party's first radio broadcast (1933), Goebbels "firmly declared that radio would be to the 20th century what the press had been to the 19th."

This correlation between mass communication media and disinformation is rooted in information technologies. Harari [10] discusses how these technologies, initially seen as truth promoters, often serve as tools for spreading collective illusions. Fake news, like Nazi propaganda, is constructed around the idea that information can be manipulated to create new realities, deviating from the goal of faithfully representing facts.

Martino [20] emphasizes that Mass Communication Research was largely influenced by the need to understand the effects of media messages, especially within the contexts of war and political propaganda. According to the author, the early schools sought to understand how media could be used both for large-scale persuasion and for manipulating public opinion, proving so effective as to mobilize large populations and sustain political systems based on domination and fear.

STEREOTYPES, COGNITIVE SHORTCUTS, AND THE DANGER OF PSEUDO-ENVIRONMENTS

A central concept for understanding communication theories emerging from this context is the distinction between crowds and masses. As pointed out by Gabriel Tarde [22], crowds are characterized by the fortuitous gathering of individuals around circumstantial events, whereas masses are composed of ideologically cohesive and unified audiences. The fundamental difference lies in manipulability. While crowds are fragmented and heterogeneous, masses that are united around a common narrative provide fertile ground for the spread of authoritarian ideologies.

This paradigm shift became apparent in the early 20th century, when mass communication began to be used as a tool to create a unified public around political discourse. In this context, "mass" is referred to as not only a collective of individuals, but a collective that relinquished individuality in favor of a larger objective, often imposed by state-controlled communication. Mass Communication Research, a theoretical movement originating in the United States, emerged from the need to understand the effects of large-scale communication on public opinion.

One of the earliest and most influential theorists of this school was Walter Lippmann, an American sociologist and journalist best known for his book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, which established foundational concepts for the study of this subject.

In this work, Lippmann [16] posited that individuals do not interact directly with the world but through representations or "pseudo-environments" constructed by the media. According to Fernanda Vasques Ferreira [4], Lippmann maintained that these representations of reality were created by the media through stereotypes and distorted images of the "external world."

Lippmann highlights the limitations of human perception regarding social and political realities, which become even more distant as the public relies solely on media to form opinions [4]. Thus, Lippmann recognized that public opinion is not the result of a rational communion of ideas, but rather, a coincidence of images and interpretations aligning within a specific historical and cultural context [4].

Lippmann argued that the media (understood here as the sum of content producers, whether press outlets or digital influencers) operates through stereotypes, which act as cognitive shortcuts to simplify complex information. Interestingly, this perspective aligns with recent studies by Daniel Kahneman [11] on two modes of human thought. According to him, the human brain operates through two distinct information-processing systems: System 1, characterized by fast, automatic, and intuitive thinking, and System 2, which involves slower, deliberate, and analytical thought.

This phenomenon of cognitive miserliness [5] reflects people's tendency to favor System 1, which requires less cognitive effort, over mobilizing System 2, which demands more mental resources. Consequently, in both Lippmann's and Kahneman's views, the content reaching individuals leverage heuristics or mental shortcuts to generate higher or lower adherence. Thus, the conservation of cognitive energy promoted by cognitive miserliness reinforces the dominance of System 1 in decision-making processes and judgment formation, fostering an ideal setting for disinformation adherence.

Though Lippmann's work does not explicitly discuss "disinformation," his studies can be analyzed from the perspective that mass communication not only transmits messages but also stimulates societal responses. He presumed that information disseminated by the media shapes how masses interpret social issues. Lippmann [16] argued that democracy was under threat as pseudo-environments created by the media rendered citizens susceptible to manipulation. Authoritarian regimes clearly exemplified the dangers of controlled communication, where the dissemination of a single worldview, reinforced by powerful symbols and simplified narratives, could lead to the erosion of opinion diversity and, consequently, the subversion of the democratic process.

This capacity to spread false information has exponentially amplified in the contemporary digital environment, characterized by hyperconnectivity and the fragmentation of public life. In this perspective, considering diverse online communities (such as WhatsApp and social media groups), "bubbles," or, "echo chambers" have an enormous impact on public opinion formation and societal polarization, mirroring Lippmann's observations from over a century ago.

FUNCTIONALIST VIEW OF COMMUNICATION AND THE POWER OF MEDIA INFLUENCE

One of the most important figures in Mass Communication Research was Harold D. Lasswell, who focused on understanding the impact of communication on mass behavior. It is important to note that his research began in the United States in the 1930s, within a society that was consuming mass media products on a large scale, such as newspapers, radio, and cinema. This was a post-World War I society that had recognized the power of propaganda to mobilize masses, influence public opinion, and strengthen authoritarian regimes.

While Lippmann was skeptical of the general population's capacity to make rational decisions based on media information, Lasswell was less pessimistic about the public. Instead, he was more interested in how leaders and governments could use communication to effectively guide the masses, especially in times of war and crisis. He viewed propaganda as a legitimate tool of power and influence.

In 1948, Lasswell proposed a model for studying communication, that asked: "Who; says what; in which channel; to whom; with what effect?" This framework became widely recognized, and remains in use today, as it provides a way to assess, to some extent, the effectiveness of message transmission, by evaluating the net consequence of the audience's perception.

However, in the same article where he describes this model, Lasswell [13] noted that, while breaking down these categories in detail was appealing, his goal was to examine the functions of communication in society. In his view, these functions were: i) surveillance of the environment; ii) correlation of society's parts in response to the environment; and iii) the transmission of social heritage from one generation to the next [13].

Surveillance refers to the media's function of collecting and distributing important information about events both inside and outside society, particularly in key sectors like government and financial markets, which affect society's functioning. França and Simões [6] summarize that "this function corresponds to the process of news circulation and can be better understood as an informational function."

The correlation of society's parts, on the other hand, involves interpreting and organizing essential information about societal events, as well as guiding people on how to respond to these events. In the case of an environmental catastrophe, for example, the media reports on the event, warns about the risks, and advises the public, while also displaying acts of solidarity to support those affected. This type of communication helps

unite people around shared values. França and Simões [6] therefore describe this as the “integration function.”

Lastly, we have the transmission of social heritage, identified as the “educational function” [6], since media also plays a role in passing down values, traditions, and knowledge from one generation to the next, ensuring the continuity of culture, social norms, and worldviews.

Thus, from Lasswell’s functionalist perspective, media plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural norms and values across generations. Within this framework, disinformation can also be understood. Instead of transmitting cohesive social values, disinformation spreads falsehoods and ideological divisions, fragmenting the social fabric. Society, in turn, receives a distorted and manipulated “heritage,” contributing to collective disorientation.

As Martino [20] points out, “Lasswell’s model had the merit of being the first specifically designed for communication, aiding in the establishment of an autonomous field of study.” However, one of the most common critiques of this model is its simplicity, as it presents communication as a linear process, lacking consideration for the receiver’s feedback and the audience’s complexity [17]. Additionally, this model does not account for the active role audiences play in receiving messages, nor the variety of interpretations that can emerge from the same message—something later addressed by Stuart Hall [9], who rejected the linear communication model and emphasized the active role of the receiver in producing new meanings.

OPINION LEADERS AND THE NARCOTIZING FUNCTION OF DISINFORMATION

Unlike Lasswell and Lippmann, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton developed a more complex and mediated approach to understanding the impact of mass communication, introducing concepts that challenged the notion of a completely passive audience in the face of media messages [19].

Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian sociologist who took refuge in the United States due to the rise of Nazism, brought a certain pessimism regarding the potentially destructive force of mass communication. In his research, he developed the theory of “narcotizing dysfunction,” which warns of the paralyzing effect of information overload. According to him, this phenomenon could immobilize the public rather than incite them to action [6]. Robert Merton, an American sociologist who collaborated with Lazarsfeld in various studies, also offered a critical perspective on mass communication. Together, they highlighted not only the media’s integrative functions, such as surveillance and cultural heritage, but also its capacity to create social dysfunctions, such as manipulation and mass passivity [6].

The two-step flow model they proposed suggests that media messages do not reach the public homogeneously; rather, they undergo a process of mediation [14]. In this model, information is first received by more influential individuals—opinion leaders—who interpret and reconfigure messages before passing them on to their followers, thereby altering how mass communication operates [6].

In the context of disinformation, the concept of opinion leaders is crucial. In the age of social networks: digital influencers, religious leaders, and public figures take on this role, functioning as mediators of disinformation. Recent Brazilian Supreme Court’s rulings, for instance, have led to the suspension of digital profiles due to strong evidence of their role in mobilizing participants for attacks on public buildings on January 8, 2023.

The dynamics observed in the spread of fake news often follow the pattern described by the two-step flow theory, where a message, initially disseminated by a central media source (or, in today’s context, an organized disinformation group), is mediated by opinion leaders who then interpret, reshape, and pass it on to their target audience. In this structure, “subjects closer to authority” who receive the central message and disseminate it more broadly within smaller groups, such as on WhatsApp and Telegram chains, gain status within their micro-social universe. These opinion leaders take on the role of spokespersons, creating a greater impact on the audience than the original message might have had on its own.

In addition to the two-step communication model, Lazarsfeld and Merton introduced the concept of

narcotizing dysfunction, which describes the paralyzing effect of excessive information exposure. They argued that inundating the public with excess amounts of information poses a false sense of engagement, hence fostering inaction [6]. This narcotizing effect creates an illusion of participation, whereby simply consuming news is interpreted as a form of political and social involvement. This creates a state of torpor and inertia, hindering effective social actions.

In the current context, where people are constantly bombarded by an immense flow of content, often contradictory and false, the public struggles to discern truth from manipulation, and this information overload taxes their cognitive capacity. As a result, rather than leading to critical and reflective action, the consumption of disinformation creates a kind of social paralysis, where the constant repetition of falsehoods contributes to individuals' passivity in the face of events surrounding them.

This erroneous perception not only confuses but also leads individuals to believe that by consuming and sharing content—even if false—they are playing an active role in society. However, such participation is illusory, as involvement based on disinformation does not produce effective social or political change but instead amplifies the state of disorientation and inertia.

Furthermore, repeated disinformation consumption leads to the normalization of false narratives, creating a vicious cycle. The more the public consumes disinformation, the harder it becomes to distinguish between reality and manipulation, intensifying the sense of powerlessness over events. This passive consumption cycle reinforces narcotization, as the public, feeling overwhelmed by the volume of false information, ultimately relinquishes their critical response capacity, accepting the state of confusion as natural.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF DISINFORMATION

The studies by Lazarsfeld and Merton contributed to a critique of simplistic communication concepts, such as the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theories, which suggested that audiences passively absorbed media messages [6]. Instead, they emphasized the need to recognize the active role of recipients and the importance of social and cultural mediation in this process.

Elihu Katz, a collaborator of Lazarsfeld, expanded on the two-step flow model by exploring how opinion leaders influence receivers and shape the impact of media messages [6]. Born in 1926, Katz was deeply influenced by the functionalist tradition of American sociology. He distanced himself from theories that viewed audiences as passive, arguing that people actively used media to seek personal gratification for the fulfillment of their own specific needs. In the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the public is seen as active, selecting and utilizing media content to meet their own interests and desires, whether for entertainment, information, surveillance, or social [6]. Thus, communication becomes a complex interaction, where audiences play a decisive role in selecting and utilizing media.

Katz identified the following five main categories that, each, reflect the specific needs that individuals seek to satisfy through media: information, guidance in daily life, entertainment, social prestige, and social interaction [12].

Katz's theory aligns with recent insights from Harari, who argues that truth and factual accuracy have not always been the primary factors in building social and political networks. Harari [10] contends that the primary function of information is to connect people and form cooperative networks, regardless of its veracity. Disinformation, in this sense, strengthens networks by creating a sense of shared identity and purpose, allowing people to work together toward common goals—even if those goals are based on distorted realities. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various disinformation campaigns circulated on social media platforms to discredit vaccines and promote ineffective treatments solely to support certain political narratives [18]. In this context, disinformation becomes a social prestige object, consistent with Katz's uses and gratifications theory.

People share information, whether true or false, to demonstrate awareness or impress their social circles. In the context of fake news, this explains why many individuals share information from their influencers without

verifying its accuracy. The act of sharing itself can be seen as a way to gain social capital within their microcosm, demonstrating that they are "in the know" about a relevant conversation or closer to a particular authority figure.

Thus, the phenomenon of disinformation that connects Harari and Katz is deeply rooted in human nature and the need to construct narratives that connect people. The active pursuit of personal gratifications—whether cognitive, emotional, or social—makes individuals more receptive to information that meets their needs, regardless of its truthfulness.

CONCLUSIONS

As seen, the theorists of Mass Communication Research provide a solid foundation for understanding the phenomenon of disinformation. For instance, Walter Lippmann's concept of pseudo-environments demonstrates how public perception is shaped by stereotypes that replace factual truth with fabricated narratives.

Harold Lasswell's functionalist analysis of communication offers a perspective of communication as a strategic instrument of social control. Although his focus was on the effectiveness of propaganda, the same framework can apply to disinformation, which, when disseminated massively and strategically, shapes opinions and behaviors, often yielding outcomes that favor specific political and economic interests.

Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, in turn, deepen our understanding of disinformation's effects through concepts like the two-step flow model and the notion of narcotizing dysfunction. Their work illustrates how disinformation intensifies when opinion leaders, whether intentionally or not, validate and redistribute these distortions, amplifying their impact. Constant exposure to such misleading content can form social apathy, where individuals falsely believe they are engaged, but in reality, are instead led to inaction.

Finally, Elihu Katz's Uses and Gratifications model offers a unique perspective on disinformation by focusing not on the impact of messages themselves but on the motivations of individuals who seek, consume, and disseminate information—including false information. People use media to fulfill individual needs, whether cognitive, emotional, or social. In the context of disinformation, this means individuals may seek content that confirms pre-existing beliefs or strengthens community ties, even when that content is false or distorted. Thus, disinformation becomes a social prestige object, reinforcing a harmful informational ecosystem that destabilizes democratic society.

Through these theoretical lenses, the phenomenon of disinformation is shown to be complex and multifaceted, deeply embedded in human cognition and social dynamics, and crucial for understanding the current challenges faced by democratic societies in maintaining a well-informed public.

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