

How Information is Processed on Social Media: A Guide for Teachers and Learners

Kelvin Beckett

Purdue University Global

In his paper, “Processed Information: A Definition,” Spencer J. Smith reflects on the terms “information” (communication of trustworthy ideas), “misinformation” (communication of less than trustworthy ideas), and “disinformation” (intentionally deceptive communication).¹ Smith argues that a new term, “processed information,” is needed to describe communication on social media and he provides three recommendations for “remediating processed information pedagogically.” Processed information may be trustworthy, but it has been, as Smith says, “so heavily handled by other agents that it becomes filled with other things besides facts.” Teachers can help students reverse-process what they read on social media and determine if in fact the ideas are trustworthy.

Smith has made an original contribution to an important topic. I say that the topic is important because, from everything we read about what’s going on in schools and colleges today, communication on social media is important to teachers and students. I say that Smith has made an original contribution to the topic based admittedly on limited evidence. Google Scholar and EBSCO title searches for “processed information” on February 12, 2024, produced only 60 and 13 articles respectively, and given their titles, sources, and a quick check of their contents, it’s clear that none of the authors pause and ask, as Smith does, what *is* processed information? In these articles, processed information is just a fact.²

Smith’s article should be, and I hope will be, the start of further philosophical investigation. I imagine future scholars asking, for example, if trustworthy ideas are not themselves processed and processed by whom—trustworthy people? They might also wonder if Smith’s article is itself processed, given the examples he draws examples from popular literature (Orwell’s *1984*) and widely used apps (ChatGPT and TikTok) which, strictly speaking, are not needed to make his argument.³ Other scholars may respond that Smith’s starting

point is what students actually encounter online, and the point of the article is to help them see it for what it is and to conduct searches for *more* trustworthy ideas. Other scholars will also note that the processing involved in Smith's article has clearly served its purpose: it has stimulated philosophers to think seriously about an important contemporary issue, an issue which is unlikely to be resolved without their help.

Processed information is not necessarily misinformation or disinformation. It is however, as Smith says, "worrisome," because of what has been added to the original fact or idea. Smith identifies four "additives." They will no doubt try to identify more, and to reexamine, clarify, and perhaps recategorize those additives he does provide.

In the "anti-veracity additive," Smith says that by recontextualizing information on social media it can become misinformation or disinformation, as happens when it is said that Critical Race Theory (a field of inquiry which exposes racism) is itself racist. Furthermore, this can be done in a way that discourages further investigation (CRT is said to be biased against whites). Here, I think, future scholars can only acknowledge Smith's insights and add more examples. Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) bathroom policies, for example, though intended to stop schools and colleges discriminating against transgender students, are said to discriminate against them even more by targeting them for abuse.⁴

In the "propaganda additive," Smith cites an example of state to be actors who cherry-pick information to justify their actions. Here, future scholars will no doubt say that this is a universal phenomenon—we all do it—and that social studies and politics teachers have been working with students to identify and look behind propaganda, as students say, "forever." Smith makes an important point here, it's just not an original point.

In the "oblivion additive," when information is processed, it risks being forgotten (the original source is not cited) and can drive out unwanted information (such as when the first search result is assumed to be the most reliable). In doing so, this can disrupt strategies for finding the truth. There is an obvious

truth here, but Smith has drawn out its significance. A trail has been followed from information to processed information, which is true by definition, but this trail is not observable, nor can it be known to exist, if processed information is presented simply as information.

In the “fascination additive,” Smith cites TikTok as an example medium where content is created using an algorithm which adds what I would call a “Wow!” factor to processed information and which causes students to suspend disbelief.⁵ The fascination additive is based on an obvious truth, but one which bears repeating. Given that information which is new to students might seem dubious at first, as well as prompting a search for connections with information they already have and which they believe is true, the trick is to present content in a way that short circuits this search.

I now leave Smith’s definition of “processed information” and his four additives for future scholars. They will no doubt try to identify more, and to reexamine, clarify, and perhaps recategorize those additives he does provide. As a scholar and teacher-educator, I want to comment on his recommendations for remedying processed information pedagogically. Smith considers state regulation of social media as news sources; but, as he says, regulation is not enough to battle the oblivion additive. Though regulation might require that alternative sources of information be provided, the wow factor would discourage students from consulting them. Thus, in addition to state regulation, Smith makes three recommendations for teachers.

In his first recommendation, Smith is on solid ground when he argues that teaching the concept of processed information would be pedagogically useful. Students need to know when they can use processed information “in a pinch,” but also that further investigation will be subsequently needed. Because students who are active on social media might resist instruction if they thought teachers were suggesting that what they read is deceptive or less than trustworthy, it might be best to let students decide which examples to investigate, perhaps beginning with processed information they believe is, and which in fact *is* trustworthy, then continuing with information they are less sure of, and so on.

I begin to resist Smith's argument in his second recommendation when he says that to provide a foundation against the oblivion additive, teachers could use material that introduces students to "past and present injustices." This sounds like a processed idea for consumption by liberal-leaning philosophers and professors, not a suggestion for historically conservative PreK-12 teachers. Of all the examples Smith might have chosen, why this one? In today's social climate, can it reasonably be thought that students are oblivious to past and especially to present injustices?

In his third recommendation, Smith is back on solid ground when he suggests, not just that teachers experiment with methods of using social media filled with processed information in their teaching, information to be fact checked by students, but also to use an app like TikTok to deliver course content and to model best practices for countering processed information in that medium. I would only add that the videos should include, and students should be challenged to find, examples presented as best practices which research has shown to be ineffective, that is, examples of misinformation and disinformation.

Smith sets out to "define" processed information, but in the end, he has done much more than that. He has created a tool for educators to help students navigate their way purposively, intelligently, and most importantly safely, when they sign in to their social media accounts. I say "safely" thinking that a better example of oblivion prevention would be what research is reporting—and students do not want to hear about—cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts and attempts.⁶ Social media is the new mass media, and as such, has the power to do tremendous harm. Smith gives teachers tools they can use to help students defend themselves. In the case of cyberbullying, victims can fight back by stripping away the additives that perpetrators typically employ and find, first of all, that they are not alone, and second, that the abuse they and others are facing tells them more about their abusers than it does about themselves.

REFERENCES

1 Spencer J. Smith, "Processed Information: A Definition," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.47925/80.1.138>

2 See for example, Ireneusz Kubiak, “Impact of IT Devices Production Quality on the Level of Protection of Processed Information Against the Electromagnetic Infiltration Process,” *Electronics* 8, no. 9 (2019): 1054, <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics8091054>

3 It might just be a historical curiosity, but the English philosopher Richard Peters and his brother were tutored as young men by Eric Blair, the future George Orwell. R. Smith; Richard Smith, “Editorial,” *Ethics & Education* 7, no. 1 (2012): 1. Also reported in the 2015 edition of *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

4 Myeshia Price-Feeney, Amy E. Green, and Samuel H. Dorison, “Impact of Bathroom Discrimination on Mental Health Among Transgender and Nonbinary Youth,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 68, no. 6 (2021): 1142-1147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.11.001>

5 Liz Alderman, “TikTok Is Subject of E.U. Inquiry Over ‘Addictive Design’,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/19/business/tiktok-european-commission-children.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

6 Sharon Reynolds, “Cyberbullying Linked with Suicidal Thoughts and Attempts in Young Adolescents,” *National Institutes of Health*, July 12, 2022, https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/cyberbullying-linked-suicidal-thoughts-attempts-young-adolescents._