

Challenges for Philosophers of Education in a Post-Truth Infosphere

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After some introductory remarks, in this address I will describe what information, misinformation, and disinformation are, and how they are related. I will focus on two issues that confront us in what could be called the infosphere. The first issue is the technological changes that have resulted in a flood of information presented to us daily, and how this affects how we see the world and our fellow beings. The second issue is the weakness of our psyches that encourages us to believe certain things that are false and often harmful, and to mistrust science. Given these issues and others for sure, I describe us in an infosphere characterized as post-truth. How do we operate in this sphere as philosophers? I will discuss two ways we can move forward. One is taking an ontic view of information, and recognizing information given to us as indicative of what is out there, and thus, like in environmental ethics, we can assess it holistically. Second, is how we as philosophers of education in this society respond to these challenges that confront us daily in schools and in society. Finally, I will discuss how our past year of new programming worked to help us think of ways forward.

After a stimulating 2023 Philosophy of Education conference in Chicago on the themes of democracy and education, we now turn our attention to a specific threat to democracy. In our recent past, we have become aware how much truth claims are challenged, and how such has altered our politics, as well as affected our health and general well-being. I see no sign that the presence of widespread misinformation and disinformation will change, either in the United States or in other countries. So, I asked these questions and others as I prepared the call and my address, and invited conversation before our meeting, either informally or at our specially planned online events organized by our program chair Amy Shuffelton leading up to this meeting: What is information? How do we know what we know and how it can be contested? What are the roles of information technology and social media? Why is there a mistrust among

many in science and scientific justification? How may psychologies of belief challenge epistemic justifications? How can we best equip schools, parents, and publics for the knowledge and information tasks that are part of healthy societies around the world? And finally: What roles can philosophers of education play in these difficult times of persistent misinformation and disinformation? What can be the scope of what we can do? I asked these questions a year ago and now will treat them today.

My intellectual journey has been from naïve hope to despair back to cautious hope for the future. Why do I have cautious hope? This is partly due to my beginning my philosophical journey believing in the power of rationality. Like many of us, I started with Socrates and the Socratic dialogues. I wanted to believe in the role of the philosopher king in Plato's *Republic*. The trial of Socrates damaged hope that philosophers would have significant roles in governing. I later thought about Descartes's emphasis on clear and distinct ideas, and the rationalist ideal, questioned by Hume, but that culminated in Hegel and Absolute Spirit. I simply cannot think this way anymore due to a post-Kantian realization of the limits of reason, that expresses itself in one way in post modernism, in some areas of philosophy, and in interpretation of the events of the last century.

The recent past in politics and society worldwide gives us plenty to think about with at least concern. This time since the candidacy of Donald Trump in this country and the rise of other right wing strongman leaders in Russia, North Korea, Hungary, Brazil, and elsewhere, is the immediate reason I think this way. Power is solidified in one autocratic leader who uses propaganda and other means of mind control to assert this power and to discourage or even quash any questioning. These leaders assume an almost divine stance where they should be unquestioned. This lack of questioning is of course dangerous for them, as they may not see forces mounted against them and react too slowly, but it also encourages an atmosphere of acceptance of what is said, and a doubt about who you are. Thereupon, one is prone to believe what one is told, and that one is too weak or ignorant to know better. Many of us in the U.S. and elsewhere marvel at how marginalized and in some cases indigent people can support a tyrant who does not have their well-being in mind. It is largely because their lives are so precarious that they are prone to disinformation that

leads too easily to confirmation bias of their own predicaments.

It is amazing that in a democratic society we have a mob ruler! Or is it? Democracies are prone to suspicion, and uncertainty is a fertile bed for such suspicion of leaders. The idea of direct democracy was tested by the events leading up to the trial of Socrates. Corrupting the youth of Athens seems eerily like what we now have with censorship, book bans, and the anti critical race theory policies in this country, not to mention what exists in even more authoritarian countries.

Look at the U.S. election that is looming as well as the ways that leaders are propped up elsewhere. Our media today are eager to have flashy stories. Quiet competent governance does not make headlines, while antics at trials do, so that is what is given coverage in our media that relies upon clicks and eyeballs on screens. Our governments at regional and national levels are not something many of us feel connected to, certainly not personally. In a recent election in my small city, I took some time to learn about mayoral candidates, but even so, sorting through Nextdoor comments on the forums and reading the candidates' platforms took more time than I was interested to give, and thus I made a partially informed choice. Candidates for other offices I did not research at all, and asked others I trusted what they knew.

Many of us greeted the information age with at least some cautious hope. Remember the hyped hope for the "information superhighway?" It turns out that large multi-laned roadways are difficult for many of us, as is the information superhighway. It is more like a flood or a firehose that overwhelms us. A typical day for me involves many unsolicited emails on my personal account from advertisers and other commercial ventures. I don't even read them, though I might benefit from "big arms after 50." I just cannot take the time to focus on what I am being offered or suggested to do. As a white cisgender male, I have privilege. I cannot imagine what the internet is like for those who feel more precarious in society. Those with dementia or depression are preyed upon by scammers who seek easy victims for their schemes.

When we heard about the information superhighway, we assumed that information would be what we wanted or needed to know, but that is usually not the case. Bits of flotsam and jetsam such as actress Jennifer Aniston's age

or sports statistics can be commanded now with a spoken question to one's phone or desktop device. This reinforces why it is unnecessary to remember any of this information, as it is *there* for us when we need it. We don't need to even type it much less go to a written source such as an encyclopedia. This is the world we live in now and perhaps for the future.

INFORMATION, MISINFORMATION, AND DISINFORMATION

Information is what we take in about the world around us. A simple definition is that information is data that is well-formed, formed according to syntax of a chosen system (whether it be linguistic or artistic or mechanical or biological, to name a few I shall discuss later) and has meaning.¹

Misinformation can be of three kinds: benign, dangerous, or cancerous. We may say something like, "did you know the Chicago Bears have won ten Super Bowls?" If I am someone who doesn't give a fig for American football, I might believe it, especially if I knew nothing about football; I trusted the person with whom I spoke; I wanted to believe that this person was correct; and nothing depended on this. I was not betting on this statement, nor was I making any decision about it. This is benign because believing this trivia does no one any harm, even if one repeated it to someone else authoritatively. Misinformation can be dangerous in many instances; medicine with an incorrect label is an easy example. Misinformation can become cancerous if it is not corrected. Medicine with an incorrect and dangerous label must be taken off shelves, and all areas where it was distributed must be warned.

Disinformation is misinformation with the intent to deceive. Propagandists intentionally play upon our tendencies to believe certain things that may be entirely false. How is this possible, if in fact something is not a fact? One method used by propaganda is to repeat the assertion often and with force. It is well known that much of what former US president Donald Trump says is false, yet this does not seem to matter as much as his delivery is convincing to enough US citizens. If others disagree with his assertions, an attack by him signals that this person is fair game for supporters to attack or threaten this person.

The flood of information that appears on our devices does breed inattention and indifference. One cannot focus on any one thing, as something else may claim our attention. Lauren Bialystok has spoken beautifully and personally

about the problem of attention in our new world of attention-seeking devices in three generations of her family.² However repeated information becomes imprinted and familiar. This applies to the kinds of information, whether misinformation or disinformation. We may lose the ability to decide if it is true or false.³ Our discernment may become overwhelmed. Other ways we are manipulated by media is that we may see stories on social media and not know the sources. We are in silos, determined by algorithms, and we can easily just read or see what we want, and not be challenged. We often don't think consciously that we may be in an echo chamber. Media siloing and being prone to accepting what we are told by those we trust are problems as many of us do not have the time or are willing to take the time to subject claims to scrutiny. We decide on parsimony in favor of our precious time and how full that time is with duties and obligations.

POST-TRUTH

Misinformation and disinformation contribute to what has been called post-truth. Post-truth is a climate we find ourselves in due to disregard for science and expertise, and how a reliance on persuasion and fabrication to advance political ends has warped our sensibilities. "Post-truth" was the Oxford Dictionary's 2016 word of the year.⁴ It had a ring to it that we had entered a different era. There has always been a mistrust of science, though I think today's mistrust is especially dangerous. In certain eras, science went against dogmatic religion. We have also had in our recent past pseudo-science such as phrenology. We might forget that such sciences have always been a part of our lives. We see around us those who claim to intuit truths, such as astrologers, card readers, and such. How do we discern the truth about scientific discoveries that many of us simply do not understand? We rely on expert knowledge for much that is in our lives, though this amount of trust in experts can be disconcerting.

Post-truth is coined as a nostalgic term for what has come after truth when we could talk about truth and agree upon it even if we had different ways, such as correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, and so forth, of describing and analyzing truth claims. Post-truth is not so much that facts do not exist but that facts are subordinate to what is desired by using facts selectively that would support one's position.⁵

In a post-truth era, I have characterized misinformation as unintended or ignorant use of fact, merely false but with no intent to deceive, though in fact deception can occur, and disinformation is the intentional proposal of false information intended to deceive. If we accept that definition, then one problem in our current political atmosphere is detecting whether those who propose misinformation are proposing disinformation. For instance, the 45th U.S. president believes that he won the 2020 election and acts upon that belief. Attempts to convince him this is misinformation fall flat with him and his handlers but is this because he knows it is false but intends to deceive or is he incapable of seeing the evidence for his loss? This should be easy to discern, but it is not, at least for me. The fact that this is difficult for a citizen like me leads me to believe we may all have this issue to various degrees.

Like a mistrust of science, fake news has been around for a long time. The attribution of objectivity to news is a relatively recent invention. Think back to the days of yellow journalism and realize too that the rich and powerful have always wanted to manipulate popular media to get ordinary people to do what they want. William Randolph Hearst manipulated the news to start the Spanish American War, and thus fake news is not just false, but is deliberately false.⁶ It then can become politically dangerous and what we call weaponized against someone, such that some people take to arms like the man who believed Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of a Washington D.C. pizza place.

We also can consider other ways truth is contested, challenged, or subverted in a post-truth era. One I have thought about in other contexts is willful ignorance, where one does not take the time or effort to understand something because one does not want to think about one's own views or predicament. One often sees this exhibited by supporters of politicians who do not think about what they have heard, but accept the argument from authority, or display confirmation bias because it conforms to what they already believe. An egregious example is believing that U.S. slavery was beneficial because it provided job skills. One can only believe this if one ignores accounts of slavery and demotes autonomy and independence for all humans. Beyond willful ignorance is of course lying, which presents what one knows to be false as true. There are other, more extreme, conditions in the infosphere that challenge us.

I will briefly discuss two, *propaganda* and *theocracy*.

Propaganda is a state sponsored form of disinformation not meant to be queried. It is hardly meant to even persuade. It is meant to impair and dismantle discernment and discussion. Propagandists rely on situations that have broken down fundamentally. These are the physical needs that must be met before higher, more complex needs, such as the need for love or achievement, can even be ventured. One cannot think rationally if one is starving.

A theocracy would be rule by a particular religion and by a god or gods. There may be many reasons for tendencies toward theocracy. A group of people feel that their way of life is deteriorating or under siege by forces and events beyond their control. They no longer have a firm foundation. Even us who have socialized in a tradition of rationality as philosophers of education realize, or I think we do, that religion is a human creation. There is nothing “out there” that is extra human that can tether us safely and securely. Our gods are our own creations, so we think. I had a scholar of medieval Christianity as a teacher in college. We talked about philosophy often, and he asked one day if I agreed that philosophies were “tone poems” in other words imaginative constructions situated in a time and place. Steeped in Hegelian absolutism at the time, I disagreed, but quickly saw the power of what my professor was saying. Indeed, post-Kantian philosophy begets such; there is nothing outside our cognition, and the “thing in itself” is merely posited but unknown.

THE WEAKNESSES OF OUR PSYCHOLOGY

We can turn to another issue in sharp relief in the infosphere: psychology and the well-known idea of cognitive dissonance where we believe what makes us comfortable and will not believe the opposite. One writer has characterized this as “we love ourselves so much we cannot see our weaknesses.”⁷ I am not willing to go that far but perhaps this applies to people with grander visions of themselves. We are prone to overlooking our weaknesses.

Suffice to say, humans are prone to not think rationally. I will mention here two psychological tendencies that make us ripe for manipulation in the infosphere. The Dunning Kruger effect notes how people with a limited ability in an area overstate their competence. Secondly, confirmation bias is also pesky and hard to combat. So, while cognitive biases cannot be eliminated as we are

human, we can guard against it by actively engaging with others and using the critical reasoning skills we here are aware of and used to using in every situation. We need to work together and to interact and question each other to help to overcome weak reasoning or bias. But this is a tool that can be weak itself.

There are psychological reasons why people believe and don't believe. We are prone to believe what we want to believe and what advantages us. We do not want to believe what might disadvantage or harm us. In addition, we believe in what supports our self-image and aids our ego. One does not want to think of what else might happen, as you have seen instances of success in areas with low rates of success, such as Hollywood acting opportunities or tenure-track university professor offers. You may well believe that you will be the exception, as your ego demands that you believe this.

In trying to interpret why people believe the unbelievable, I am asserting that we need to think more directly about the psychology of belief, especially its causes related to physical safety and well-being. How people are prone to beliefs has underlying physical roots. Abraham Maslow, in talking about a hierarchy of needs, showed us these physical roots in the physical and physiological needs we must have: food, water, shelter, and so forth provide the support for other mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. The basic support for the life of the mind and heart must be provided, and when it is under stress, then these other needs and aspirations cannot be fulfilled. The mind and heart may become so stressed that any normal guardrails, such as logic and analysis and discernment of falsity or advantage taking, make one prey for demagogues and those who saturate one's senses with false statements.

We can also use Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to characterize the situation of people we find prone to misinformation and disinformation. Bronfenbrenner's concentric circles show influences and factors that describe a particular person. In brief and without the technicalities of the diagram, an individual person is the center of dialectical influences that work both ways. As the rings go further out from the individual person, they become more comprehensive in one's situation, culminating in a time and place that situates the person. The spheres can be analyzed for clues to factors that lead to beliefs that do not correspond to common knowledge.

I despair that I have arrived where I believe mere argument does not lead to changed behavior. My own work on the emotional and bodily elements of thinking deals with how we decide to behave ethically. My colleague, philosopher Mark Fagiano, and I are starting to devise XR simulation of ethical reasoning that presents ethical reasoning in a bodily environment where bodily behavior is recorded and studied. This type of practice is not only embodied but is immersive. We try to simulate a real-world experience in ethical decision-making, which we believe is a step beyond verbal or written examples or arguments. Whether that leads to heightened rationality is an open question, and I am not fully convinced.

So how do we go forward? I conclude with two suggestions that may help us in the post-truth infosphere: seeing information ontologically and enacting practical ventures as philosophers of education that may build upon the programming of this past year.

THE ONTOLOGY OF INFORMATION

An ontology of information should be valuable to us as philosophers of education.⁸ So far, we have been discussing the semantic quality of information, and using that to contrast misinformation and disinformation. However, information has physical characteristics. We see these in qualities of an item, as its length and composition, for instance, are both informative. Thus, information constitutes all that we experience, and if we see everything composed of information, then information is ontological rather than simply epistemological. Could we even describe information as an environment, and thus use the same ethical reasoning of environmental ethics to speak of the good of information? We must think holistically because we are cognizant beings that are part of this information environment, not separate from it. We should be looking at information as ontological, that is, as we encounter entities, they will be understood and analyzed according to their information and the patterns that they exhibit, and we can analyze these patterns.

This vision of information as ontological can help us make further appreciative and critical comments and arguments about our current world and its infosphere. If we think of information as epistemological, as news or content, we may overlook its ontic characteristics of “patterns or entities in

the world.”⁹⁹ And thus, if it is being rather than known by another being, we can regard it as good and sufficient if it lives up to what it should be and bad and insufficient if it does not. It is an entity and as such something that exists and connects with other information in the infosphere. We can view misinformation and disinformation in this manner. Misinformation is that which has been taken from its connections and grafted onto other information, so it is no longer exhibiting coherence and meaning. If I say that I was told that the sun rises in the west, that is not malicious, but it is incorrect and thus I was misinformed, and as I have discussed, disinformation is intentional use of a poorly grafted entity to intentionally deceive, or as in the case with propaganda, to control and dominate.

Any entity is informational and thus as entity worthy of care and concern as part of the infosphere. This adaptation of bioethics extends that discipline to all entities, not just living animate beings. It may be a sharp rock in our garden path, but that is because we have made the path. We may want to move it, but still need to see that it is part of our surroundings and made by natural processes that preceded and will exceed us, and at least tacitly acknowledge that when we remove it. Looking at everything informationally helps us to think deeply about what exists, and how everything is bound together in webs and nodes of information.

PRACTICAL PATHS FOR PHILOSOPHERS OF EDUCATION IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

Finally, knowledge and thus information are crucial to how a democracy works. Even though it is weak, all we have is our thinking and our rationality that can help foster a democracy. How do we philosophers of education equip schools, parents, and publics for the tasks ahead in our information, misinformation, and disinformation infosphere? For the internet, we cannot rely on guardrails or censorship. That train left the station a long time ago. Many societies aspire for an openness, and with openness comes disturbing images, such as war casualties or animal cruelty, or distasteful or lurid images of any number of human practices. We have decided little about how to regulate these images or speech for young children, though there is great concern about what children are exposed to. This exposure in instances does not include concern

about political speech that may include misinformation or disinformation or hate speech. Parents may be individually concerned with speech but there is little effective action against such speech.

What roles can philosophers of education play in these difficult times? What can and can't we do? This is a difficult question because what we do best is analyze, reason, and think reflectively. We also discuss and in the best of circumstances, listen to each other and seek first to understand. I have expressed some doubt that these actions can help us in these times even if they are all we have. All these actions have been pushed to the side by not only the inexorable streams of information, misinformation, and disinformation, but these same streams can be and are manipulated by advertisers in a capitalist society and political groups to their advantage. Though reason is weak, we must exercise it. We philosophers of education in our societies have our thoughtful papers and our teaching, but much of what we do otherwise is limited to events and occasions like this, where we reflect upon what we do, and may find it lacking. I started to think what I was contributing to the discussion by choosing this theme and serving as PES president. I knew I should lay out the landscape here but beyond that, could I make a difference with my own work and work with others? I want to believe that teaching my undergraduate students how to reason and to think critically is helping with this issue, but I have no conclusive feedback that it is or how it is other than their written work and what they give me back to my prompts in class or on papers. With my graduate students, with whom I have discussed several of these works, I need to be more explicit about our information landscape. As an experienced academic, I often feel that I cannot do anything beyond working with my students. I have not become an activist scholar to any substantial degree. I feel inadequate in what I have done, and yet hopeful that I would do more.

I think at a minimum when we see falsity, we cannot allow it to be accepted, even if we are not able to prevent some from believing it. Of course, we *should* confront the liar.¹⁰ Many of us have always believed this. However, in this era of alternative facts and post-truth we stand to be overwhelmed by a sheer amount of dubious content that needs to be fact-checked. It is hard to accept facts that go against what we believe. Perhaps personal and bodily security are

our best strengths against simply going with confirmation bias. Or to always question and be skeptical realizing that confirmation bias and our tendency to accept certain beliefs should always be questioned. I too wonder if our university system of rewards makes us prone to creating a great deal of content that may end up not contributing to understanding our epistemological challenge. I don't want to stop any of us from writing as much as we can, because I believe writing is a mode of self-discovery and edification, even if it does not get read much, and much of this writing can help us with our challenges.

In my own desire to do more, I was heartened by the programs PES presented this past year on the theme. The effort was led by Amy Shuffelton and included sessions on: generative AI (such as ChatGPT), a session on memory holes inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, a CORE sponsored session on anti-CRT legislation, and a session led by scholars in Poland on post-truth in that country.

Our first session on ChatGPT dealt with what many faculty feel about this new world of large-scale generative AI. However, there was enough discussion, by Sasha Sidorkin, Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd, Spencer Smith, and others about proactive measures to learn how to use, and even integrate ChatGPT into teaching, and how these tools can be used to decrease routine writing.

In the second session, on memory holes, we played off what the term meant to Orwell, and how memory holes are still present, and even more insidious than they were for Orwell. A memory hole is where information and statements can be dumped and burned to prevent anyone from learning about it.

Our third session was led by the Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE). Participants discussed anti-CRT legislation and sentiment and showed how such information can be heavily regulated and disposed down a memory hole. This session featured work by teacher Kyleigh Rousseau, who uses art to combat negative stereotypes through individuation, whereby each person is recognized and portrayed through art as an individual. Any kind of recognition of one's individuality works to provide information that must be accounted for, and not simply rolled into a stereotype. Rousseau uses ways to decenter attitudes and implicit biases with what she calls perspective taking with personal dolls. Children are encouraged to touch and care for dolls that are different looking than themselves; a doll named Joe is darker skin colored and the teacher would

encourage kindness. Finally, a whole-body portrait allows each child to imaginatively describe each other in a particular way that, again, combats stereotypes that rely upon vague or unspecified information, misinformation, or disinformation.

In our fourth and final session, scholars from Poland discussed the relation of knowledge, ignorance, and political power, and how power is maintained in a post-truth Poland. Polish political candidates rely on algorithms to create digital profiles of voters based on social media posts so that these candidates can appear to be speaking personally to each voter. The right-wing Law and Justice party worked hard to overcome what they saw as shame in an acknowledgement of historical events that may disturb pride in Poland today. This type of revisionist misinformation and disinformation is common to other countries, such as legislation banning the teaching of critical race theory in several U.S. states. Learning about the past should never make one feel shame seems to be what is intended both in the U.S. and in Poland.

Over this past year, one of the things I gained by thinking about this year's conference theme and what to say in my Presidential Address is how dependent philosophy of education can be on other disciplines and fields. We cannot go alone, and it is best to always acknowledge that. While philosophers of education can analyze other fields for their contributions, and synthesize these contributions into a recommendation or position, we must be willing to learn from other areas without giving way on our special mission to think broadly and comprehensively. We may not collect the data to show how beliefs develop, but we do the connection, and the metacognition other researchers may not do. The question is, how can philosophers of education best educate others in our post-truth society? In a certain sense we must work within it, constantly being alert and vigilant about developments in the infosphere.

I envision that discussions at this year's conference raised our awareness of what we as philosophers of education can do. I have spent some time here cautioning us about what limited beings we are, but we also bring special (though fragile) strengths to bear on issues of being, truth, and knowledge. Given these limitations, I look forward to what more we can do to understand the infosphere and its being, and how we can work to create and conserve robust information and knowledge to help us make our world more thoughtful and caring.

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