

Towards an anthropology of misinformation

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Having worked on the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, I came across my fair share of dubious information regarding radioactive risks. This ranged from narratives of mutant-like animals roaming a nuclear wasteland to misleading analogies that banalized the potential risk of residual radioactivity. When I came back from my fieldwork, colleagues, friends and family members asked if my decade-long research aimed to underscore the reality of Fukushima and get rid of the misinformation that surrounds a controversial catastrophe.

As an ‘expert’ who had been to the field, they expected me to behold some ultimate truth that would shed light on the situation. ‘Was it “really” safe?’, ‘Was the government lying?’ or ‘Was the risk overblown?’ were recurrent questions. As a sociocultural anthropologist, I often replied that I was less interested in finally telling what was scientifically ‘true’ or ‘false’. Instead, I explained my work as in the business of understanding the internal logic of my informants, which could reveal why some people believed that post-Fukushima radiation was dangerous.

In contrast, others believed that it was safe. Needless to say that these explanations made my interlocutors hungry for more. Yet these exchanges also made me ponder a term that is the subject of this article: misinformation.

In a period of extreme anxiety surrounding truth claims – a phenomenon often referred to as post-truth – misinformation has become a buzzword that permeates contemporary public debates, research agendas and academic funding. Misinformation, which refers to false or scientifically discredited claims, has always existed. Yet it has become significantly exacerbated due to the influence of digital platforms, which enable users to post any kind of information with minimal filters. For example, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp or 9GAG operate in a regime of immediacy that is rarely hampered by traditional gate-keeping techniques like fact-checking, peer reviewers or the editorial process.

This form of misinformation reached the US Presidency, with Donald Trump repeatedly tweeting false claims during his mandate. Regarding the 2020 US election, this legacy of misinformation resulted in intense political radicalization within the US, ultimately leading to the 6 January Capitol insurrection (see West 2021). Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the widespread misleading information on the internet. In fact, the situation has become so dire that the World Health Organization (WHO) now talks of an ‘infodemic’, which corresponds to ‘too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak’.¹ Like Trump’s misleading tweets, misinformation surrounding Covid-19 creates real impacts, such as people refusing to get vaccinated due to erroneous information about the vaccines’ safety.

Academics are attempting to curb this rise and spread of misinformation. Political scientists, communication scholars, psychologists, computer scientists, public health experts and even business schools are on the frontline of such research, pioneering novel ways to track, assess and combat misinformation. It has become common to see think tanks, academic programmes and research agendas tackling this phenomenon head-on. Think of the Oxford Martin Initiative on Vaccine Misinformation, the Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review or the MIT Sloan research about social media and misinformation.



As a discipline that studies human beings, anthropology has much to contribute to these debates, especially in ways that make the study of misinformation unique and unprecedented.

Anthropology and misinformation

Understanding the potential of an anthropological approach to misinformation requires a set of inquiries into its theoretical and methodological underpinning. First, how can anthropologists theorize misinformation in ways that set it apart from the conceptualization of other disciplines? Second, how can they pragmatically research misinformation via their own methodological tools?

To answer the first question, it is helpful to provide a brief picture of how misinformation is generally theorized in current public and intellectual debates. For instance, the US National Academy of Science broadly defines misinformation as ‘information that is incorrect, possibly by accident’ (Scheufele & Krause 2019: 7662). Similarly, political scientists argue that misinformation occurs ‘when people hold incorrect factual beliefs and do so confidently’ (Jerit & Zhao 2020: 77). Information scholars conceptualize misinformation in terms of false content produced via unreliable media (Dhoju et al. 2019). Lastly, medical scholars describe it as a ‘powerfully destructive force in this era of global communication, when one false idea can spread instantly to many vulnerable ears’ (Nelson et al. 2020: 510). These conceptualizations demonstrate that misinformation operates in a classic truth versus falsity dichotomy, and anthropologists have long criticized this dualism as representing a simplistic understanding of the world. Via these definitions, misinformation is conceptualized as inherently wrong and in need of being identified, combated and deleted. Misinformation, in and of itself, appears irrelevant to broader analytical probing.

Instead of theorizing misinformation via such a lens, I believe that anthropologists could theorize it as potential signals that reveal a range of narratives and experiences within specific issues. Indeed, anthropology has created a rich literature intricately linked with crucial misinformation aspects, such as discredited forms of knowledge, trust or contextual understandings. For instance, anthropologists have long studied magic, witchcraft or sorcery as cultural phenomena that are integral parts of given societies (Tambiah 1990). Among the Azande of Central Africa, Edward Evans-Pritchard (1982 [1937]) famously underscored how magic is used to make sense of events

Fig. 1. Japanese citizens protesting the danger of radiation after Fukushima.



Fig. 2. Example of a satirical meme, depicting actor Heath Ledger as a policeman.

that cannot be controlled. He demonstrated that things appearing irrational to Westerners' eyes made much sense when put back in their social context.

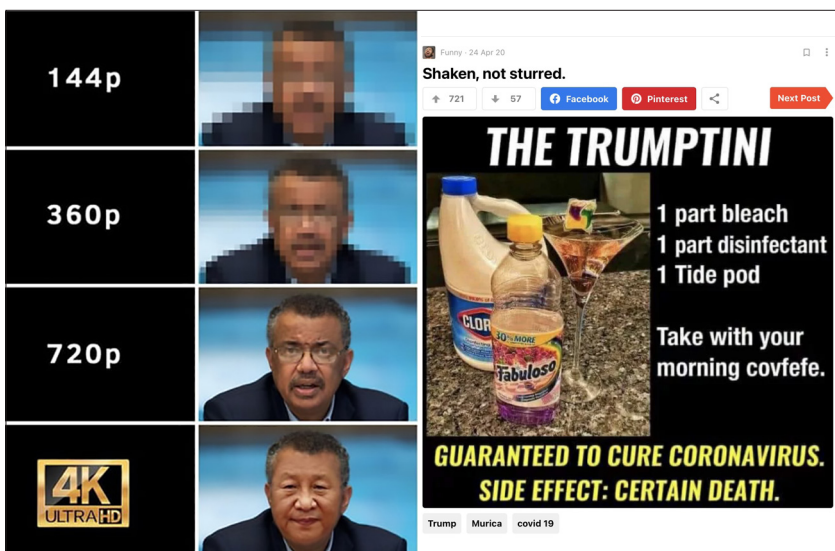
Similarly, anthropologists have studied forms of dubious narratives, such as rumours, gossip or scandals, via the lens of ethnographic data, which reveals much about the inner working of social relations (Gluckman 1963). Furthermore, we can think about how fake stories, like satire, function to reveal social discontent, sometimes towards economic inequality or corporate influence in politics (see Haugerud 2020). Therefore, past anthropological approaches provide building blocks for a more robust understanding of misinformation by underscoring the porous demarcation between truth and falsity and the importance of contextualized analysis.

Additionally, anthropology has examined topics that closely echo misinformation, such as political lies, conspiracy categories or fake news. For example, in exploring false assertions in the Trump era, Carole McGranahan argues that an anthropological approach to lies should 'not seek to correct them' but instead ask, 'How do we understand lies and liars in their cultural, historical, and political context?' (2017: 243). Research on conspiracy theories has explored secret schemes' popular tropes as signs and symptoms of peculiar preoccupations or anxieties (Lepselter 2016), and this 'tells us much about contemporary societies' (Greenwood 2022: 4). Finally, Andrew Graan et al. (2020) have focused on fake news as a symptom of a 'shift in social trust', especially towards media, authority and public institutions. They emphasize how fake news has less to do with right or incorrect information and more to do with ideological beliefs. Fake news can function as a 'particular way of participating in a public' that enables certain groups to 'advance preferred representations of some issue' (ibid.).

The works above strengthen a call to see misinformation as potential signals of broader social and epistemological crises. This prompts analytical probing regarding different phenomena, such as the causes of mistrust in experts' organizations, the frustrations of specific communities in post-crisis situations and the formation of new modes of public participation in the digital sphere.

Regarding the second question, Kai Shu et al. (2020) argue that most forms of misinformation can pragmatically be studied by focusing on three core aspects of the phenomenon, namely: (1) the content of misinformation; (2) the users targeted by its practices; and (3) the ways misinformation spreads across a particular network. The work of computer scientists like Shu et al. is predominantly aimed at curbing harmful misinformation and usually revolves around debunking goals. For instance, this

Fig. 3. Humorous memes found on 9GAG.



work can include software processes that automatically fact-check the content of information or better comprehend the technical aspects of how misinformation travels to prevent its spread. These efforts should be applauded, especially when misleading information creates harmful side-effects. At the same time, each of these core aspects of misinformation can be studied with a different goal in mind, which is one of interpretation rather than detection or debunking. Therefore, I put an anthropological twist on the three core aspects of misinformation studies in the following sections. I demonstrate that these areas of study can equally be analysed as signals that reveal interesting characteristics about human societies, cultures and behaviour. This endeavour is far more fascinating than branding claims as true or false.

Content and context

In his seminal book *The interpretation of culture*, Clifford Geertz (1973) argues that cultures need to be studied via 'thick description', a concept that emphasizes the importance of analysing ethnographic observation concerning a context of production. Drawing on the work of philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Geertz explains the significance of thick description by explaining the subtle difference between an eye twitch, a wink and the parody of a wink. While each of these eye movements appears the same to a photographer, Geertz underscores the huge symbolic difference between an involuntary eye movement and a wink, explaining that the latter is a form of communication and a sign that can be interpreted as the complicity between friends (ibid.: 6-7). For Geertz, thick description corresponds to the ability to sort 'winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones' (ibid.: 16).

Like Geertz's thick description, I believe that analysing misinformation content in its given context provides a richer understanding of the phenomenon. To give a concrete example, I will examine an instance of misinformation associated with the nationwide movements against police brutality and systemic racism in the US following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Misinformation began to surge rapidly on social media, a prevalent form of which was peddled by right-wing extremists who attempted to discredit the protests. Pragmatically speaking, misinformation took the form of internet memes: that is, cultural ideas virally shared via the internet. Under the form of images and text, these memes often depicted law enforcement officers as victims of Antifa (antifascist) groups, which were supposedly behind the George Floyd protests.

Interestingly, sections of the internet community, especially millennials, began to react to these attacks by creating their own memes. This was done to parody and ridicule right-wing extremists' conspiracy theories. One of the most popular iterations of such parody included different pictures of the actor Heath Ledger in his famous Joker role in *The Dark Knight*. One of these memes depicted Ledger as the Joker without make-up with a text usually explaining that this courageous 'policeman' had been disfigured by Antifa groups (Fig. 2). This is a notable example of humour acting as a form of political opposition to challenge certain ideologies (Klumbyte 2014; Liston 2018) – in this case, right-wing beliefs. However, ironically, numerous myth-debunking campaigns took these forms of satire as actual attempts to propagate misinformation. For instance, the international news organization Reuters created a fact-check of such 'misinformation', explaining that: 'Social media posts have claimed to show images of a policeman disfigured by a member of the Antifa movement. This is false. The posts feature two photographs of late actor Heath Ledger in character as the Joker in the 2008 blockbuster film "The Dark Knight".'²

This verdict of falsity, although *technically* correct, stands as a form of description that is taken apart from its

Fig. 4. Pizzagate was a conspiracy theory accusing Democratic Party members of human trafficking and child prostitution

Fig. 5. Mistrust in experts' organizations have resulted in WHO-related conspiracies.

specific context. Indeed, it does not understand that this meme is not an attempt at creating misinformation per se but a satire of the work of right-wing extremists and, ultimately, an indirect critique of its distasteful racist undertone. As Geertz argues in his work, the difference between a wink and the parody of a wink is a message: 'Only now it is not conspiracy but ridicule that is in the air. If the others think he is actually winking, his whole project misfires as completely, though with somewhat different results, as if they think he is twitching' (1973: 6-7).

In the same way, the Heath Ledger meme can be interpreted as ridicule of right-wing misinformation. Consequently, this 'thick description' of misinformation blurs the simple line between truth and falsity. It forces the researcher to break down the category of misinformation as something far from homogeneous while producing contextual readings of alleged misinformation that can be sensitive to varied factors. Satire, for instance, demonstrates that not all fake information is a harmful attempt to mislead specific publics; it can also consist of narratives that need to be interpreted in their proper context.

The other as the target of misinformation

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the WHO became the target of frequent misinformation quotes that accused the organization of secretly working with China. For instance, on 9GAG – a Hong Kong-based social media platform – one could see numerous memes that pointed towards potential conspiracy theories. One of these included a picture of scissors trying to cut water, so as to convey the inefficacy of the organization, with the tagline 'WHO is China's puppet'. Another featured a blurry image of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's Director-General, situated next to the term '144p', corresponding to a low-definition quality picture. As the definition augments, his image becomes more evident, until by the time it reaches '4K Ultra HD', it is replaced by a picture of Xi Jinping, alluding to the claim that the Chinese Communist Party controls the WHO (Fig. 3).

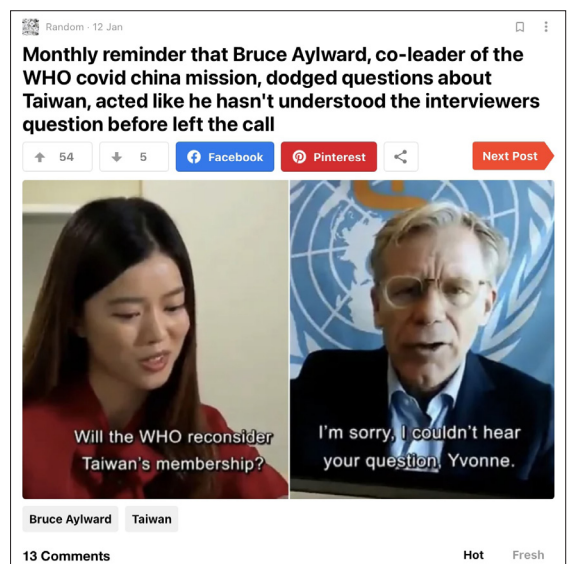
Considering the role that the WHO played in myth-busting campaigns, I began to wonder why the organization was facing such an attack. Was it simply being attacked by peddlers of conspiracy theories, or did this reveal something about broader issues of trust in experts' organizations? Indeed, many have argued that misinformation is closely entangled with trust in the Other, a phenomenon itself influenced by shifting cultural or political contours (see Graan et al. 2020). For instance, Natalia Roudakova (2017) examines how the monetization of journalism in post-communist Russia changed the trust that people had towards media, leading them to perceive journalists as 'political prostitutes'.

Similarly, by looking at the cultural or political contexts surrounding pandemic trust, I realized that many of these misinformation memes gained popularity after a WHO senior adviser, Bruce Aylward, seemed to dodge a question regarding Taiwan's Covid-19 response. During an interview with Radio Television Hong Kong, Aylward was asked if the WHO would reconsider Taiwan's membership in its organization, from which it is currently excluded.³ He then remained silent for a long time, later claiming that he couldn't hear the question (Fig. 5). This episode ultimately led the Hong Kong and Taiwan media to accuse the WHO of corruption while maintaining neutrality towards mainland China.

Here, the point of interest does not lie in underscoring whether or not an agency of the United Nations actually lacks independence towards China. The misinformation memes can instead be interpreted as broader signals that experts' organizations fail to reach specific social segments or are perceived as trustworthy and authoritative establish-



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9GAG.COM

ments. Vincent Ialenti (2020) describes this phenomenon as the 'deflation of expertise', the product of a time characterized by a rising global scepticism against expert-vetted knowledge and scientific authority. He argues:

Today, we are witnessing a rising global scepticism of technocratic knowledge, liberal arts education, scientific research on the environment, and even the very possibility of there being verifiable facts, truth, or a single shared reality out there. In many countries, 'experts are increasingly sceptical about publics' and vice versa, as the 'bargain' long made between them is 'rapidly unraveling'. (ibid: 6)

Following this line of thought, the misinformation memes above highlight the specific political stakes – the steamy foreign relationship between mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan – that hamper trust while triggering the appearance of a WHO-related conspiracy. Analysed in such a way, misinformation has the potential to underscore the peculiar social, cultural or political factors that contribute to the creation, emergence and popularization of conspiracy theories. This provides a richer analysis of expert and political trusts than simply stating that misinformation is the work of 'crazy' conspiracists.

Furthermore, Giovanna Parmigiani (2021: 506, original emphasis) has argued that 'the adoption of conspiracy theories' is 'an expression of *dissensus*' by a community that

1 <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic/the-covid-19-infodemic>.

2 <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-joker-idUSKBN2402BM>.

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UICYFh8U2xM>.

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Scheufele, D.A. & N.M. Krause 2019. Science audiences, misinformation, and fake news. *PNAS* 116(10): 7662-7669.

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often wants to be recognized in a particular sphere. In this case, the WHO-related conspiracy also echoes Taiwan's willingness to be part of the United Nations' system and to be recognized on an international scale, something currently hampered by China's influences. Studying misinformation as a signal of trust towards the Other helps us understand the context that led to unique cases surrounding the 'deflation of expertise' while increasing misinformation.

Misinformation and its network

When I began researching misinformation around Covid-19, I realized that numerous misleading memes, videos, images or texts often shared a similar characteristic, falling within the lens of humour. The quality of what could be understood as funny took on many forms, such as parodies, self-deprecation or dark humour. For instance, memes surrounding Covid-19 often took ironic or hyperbolic undertones by making fun of the side-effects of vaccines in silly and surreal ways that did not correspond to their potential adverse health effects or to the pseudoscientific narratives of more traditional anti-vaccine groups.

In other instances, misinformation memes provided instructions for self-made Covid-19 treatments, notably containing dangerous household items like Clorox, a popular US bleach product. Yet, in reality, these memes stood as a parody of President Donald Trump's comments during a press conference when he suggested injecting disinfectant as a potential treatment (Fig. 3). Interestingly, my own partner's Instagram account was shut down when she shared one such meme that made her laugh a lot. Instagram flagged her attempt to share this meme as propagating harmful misinformation, even though this was not her original intention.

Anthropologists have asked a series of exciting questions in talking about misinformation, such as: '[W]hat makes a message worthy of sharing? What helps a message go viral?' (Graan et al. 2020). To partly answer these questions, I believe that the entertaining aspect of digital materials like memes is one of the reasons why misleading information can sometimes spread virally across given networks. Indeed, it is essential to remember that many social media platforms, like 9GAG, Instagram or TikTok, are also in the business of entertainment rather than in the industry of information communication like Twitter or more traditional news media. Digital media and technology columnist Todd Spangler (2021) argues that TikTok is not a 'social media app', but a 'top entertainment destination for a new generation'. Similarly, 9GAG, one of the largest communities of silly and offensive memes on the internet, is a place usually visited to kill time. It provides funny pictures, GIFs, memes, and videos subdivided into categories. In 2020, one of the most popular categories was the 'Coronavirus' one, which provided 'News and discussion about Coronavirus (Wuhan Virus, COVID-19)'.

These platforms, which specifically promote humorous content, can become the ground by which misinformation spreads across the network, primarily if they are understood as 'funny' by some users. Max Gluckman (1963) argued that gossip is essential for social systems. He claimed that gossip is valuable in itself, even if some people don't necessarily approve of its underlying message (ibid.: 315). Similarly, sharing or liking a piece on digital media platforms does not necessarily imply that one agrees with the content's message. Instead, these gestures can be interpreted as a reward that one piece of information has successfully made you laugh, which is especially valued in these dire and severe pandemic times. Specific fragments of misinformation should not be analysed as becoming popular because people necessarily believe their content or agree with their underlying

political messages. The popularity of misinformation is equally driven by its entertainment value. As such, misinformation can spread simply because the medium through which it is conveyed is funny and gives space to creativity, such as producing satires, parodies or even parodies of parodies.

For some individuals, this entertainment value might appear tone-deaf, especially when the pandemic results in the death of loved ones. Yet these items also reveal how specific population segments have experienced the situation. For millennials or members of Generation Z, the primary users of the platforms above, the creation, sharing and consumption of funny misleading information demonstrate that some people are bored (due to the lockdown, quarantine and the inability to see friends, attend school, etc.). They are simply looking to kill time, laugh, change their minds or mess on the internet for the sheer pleasure of creating shock value. These, like job loss, death tolls or depression, are also experiences of how people are living through a public health crisis. They reveal that misinformation spread is more complex than politically motivated foreign agents – a much more popular trope in misinformation studies.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that probing the veracity of particular claims to systematically discredit people is of little interest to the discipline of anthropology. This is being done by other disciplines, but it is doubtful that current attempts to simply get rid of misinformation will fully succeed since the phenomenon is an undeniable part of the current digital landscape. Against this, anthropology is well placed to study misinformation otherwise. Indeed, by going beyond the simplistic duality of truth and falsity, it can analyse misinformation as signals that reveal much about our diverse cultures. This doesn't mean that we need to create theoretical frameworks from scratch. On the contrary, we can build bridges with former anthropological insights, drawing on subjects as diverse as magic, gossip or political humour. This, in turn, can help us to theorize the structures, underlying beliefs and intertextual characteristics of misinformation, be this in the form of fake news, satire, click-bait or conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, our methods of participant observation, in-depth interviews and long-term fieldwork shed much light on the specific cultural practices of the digital age while foregrounding the internal logics of subcultural groups which might appear weird at first, but are rational in given contexts. These methods can help us study the social conditions, cultural influences and specific networks that produce, circulate and recontextualize misinformation. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has sharpened skills regarding online or digital ethnography, which will be of significant use to anthropologically examine misinformation and develop future sites of studies like internet memes or TikTok videos.

An anthropological approach to misinformation raises numerous questions: What are the specific ideologies that misinformation practices attempt to (de)legitimize? What phenomena are at the origin of shifts in public and expert trust? Ethically speaking, how can we be careful not to pathologize the Other while still providing a trenchant critique of social injustices present in misinformation? To answer these questions, it will be important that anthropologists create their own network and research agenda around misinformation. Undoubtedly, there is a need for further education on misinformation's many forms. As a discipline that underscores sociocultural context and informants' experience, anthropology is especially well placed to promote this education and contribute to debates on misinformation in new ways. ●