

Alberta Doctors' Digest

The fifth horseman of the apocalypse

- **Disinformation: false information with intention to mislead**
- **Misinformation: inaccurate information or false information often with intention to mislead**

“Two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, confessed their guilt for crimes they committed in China and were released on bail for medical reasons before they departed on a plane to Canada on Friday, the *Global Times* learned from a source close to the matter on Sunday. After the confirmation from related departments and diagnosis of professional medical institutes and under the guarantee of the Canadian Ambassador to China, Beijing’s Number 2 Intermediate People’s Court and the High People’s Court of Liaoning Province decided to release them on bail in accordance with law, the source said.” *Global Times*, September 26, 2021.

Well, what a hoot, that was. While there may be a few “useful idiots” in this country and around the world who were taken in by this blithering, pious claptrap worthy of Monty Python, the statement was for local mainland China consumption. It supports the Orwellian belief that preposterous, make-believe, cock-and-bull yarns work with a credulous, captive population willing to believe anything they are told – until, that is, sufficient numbers realize they are being taken for fools and they decline to drink more Kool-Aid. This deliberate disinformation (released just as Huawei’s Princess Meng’s aircraft gained cruising altitude for Beijing), though malevolent, barely qualifies. A donkey can see through it. The two Michaels were hostages.

It was Bertie Dishington who first broke the news to me, age five, at the village school in southeast Scotland, that all was not as it seemed at Christmas.

“Sandy, d’ye ken there’s no Santa,” he said, with the flippancy of a rapidly learning serial digger into comfortable assumptions.

“What? No Santa?”

“Aye. It’s jist yer Dad.”

This stark statement carried the stinging ring of truth – it had to be checked. My mother reluctantly confirmed the awful news – my first experience of the universality of disinformation and misinformation, albeit in Santa’s case, fairly benign. Many of us quietly propagated the deception, accepting the truth but going along with the fabrication for many years so as not to rock the boat. This refusal to accept the implications of an inconvenient truth tends to carry on into adulthood, be it about climate change, vaccinations, residential schools or government debt.

And so each morning, as I attend to the daily ablutions, seated comfortably, I reach for a book nestled in a straw basket. This book has been a loyal friend during many intestinal exercises – fortifying one with the required scepticism against the daily barrage of misinformation, disinformation, biased journalism, ignorance and outright BS that accosts one from the radio, TV, newspapers, internet, social media, and from ordinary conversations with patients, family, friends, acquaintances and assorted fellow human beings.

The book (12 x 8 x 4 cm) fits snugly in the left hand while seated and is called *The Book of General Ignorance* by John Lloyd and John Mitchison, published in 2006 by Faber and Faber. It contains 359 examples of “facts” widely assumed to be correct but on deeper investigation, inaccurate – one for nearly each day of the year!

Do you think carrots are good for eyesight? Probably not if you’re scientifically trained, but most members of the general public believe it to be so – and they’re also good for cancer apparently. An amusing story behind this belief is that an ace fighter pilot, Group Captain John Cunningham of the RAF’s 604 squadron (which operated at night testing new airborne radar systems in World War II), was nicknamed “Cat’s Eyes Cunningham.” Rumours were floated out by the war government that his nocturnal skills were due to carotene supplied by his fondness for carrots, a home-grown veggie in abundant supply in pitifully food-rationed Britain. The mothers of the nation responded enthusiastically by loading the plates of a generation of children with the humble but largely despised carrot.

This disinformation was so successful the Ministry of Food went further and put out the dodgy information that eating fish (also unrationed) was good for growing brains – and childhood plates were loaded with herring and cod with carrots on the side. Post war, bottles of ghastly tasting cod liver oil were sent to every family for daily dosing – only tolerable with a chaser of sweet orange juice.

Or try this: who first said, “Let them eat cake!”? No, it wasn’t her. She may have said: “Qu’ils mangent de la brioche” – brioche being a slightly enriched form of bread, but even that is uncertain. No, it was a common printed propaganda line promoting the idea of decadence in the French aristocracy long before the Revolution, and it was put out to help the spectating tricoteuses to remain comfortable with their knitting while watching the guillotine fall on poor Marie Antoinette’s neck.



Feasible misinformation has always been the game in politics (Photo credit: Gerd Altmann, Pixabay.com)

I've mentioned before Joe Schmo's Biker's Eatery in Sicamous B.C. on Highway 1 as a good place to stop for lunch or dinner and how the interior is festooned with quotes and jokes much loved by bikers who are not known for political correctness and may not even know what that means. One such quote reads: "Half of the voters in this country have less than average intelligence."

Political misinformation finds ready reception in all countries including Canada and with the last election it was present in drifts and droves. Now behind us, it was interesting to note that the CBC had a leftish Toronto-centric leaning, whereas Calgary's 770 CHQR harbored a mainly western, right-leaning bias. Listening to the latter, you can hear the most bizarre opinions on vaccinations being aired despite the host's attempts to reign in some of the more preposterous wafflings.

I always knew that 10-12% of the population of this province were fatheads but did not realize it was higher than that. Oscar Wilde was, as usual, right: "By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, journalism keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community."

Every narrative is biased. My old friend Friedrich Nietzsche insisted there are no facts, only interpretations. Truth is separate from reality, and like Durga the Hindu Goddess with her eight arms, there will be multiple interpretations of the reality of, say, a traffic accident – as judges are well aware of.

Misinformation and disinformation have flourished in this pandemic. There is an obvious necessity to get everyone vaccinated, but there are many reasonable questions which so far are unanswered – such as the interplay of vaccination with sub-clinical and clinical infections for best resistance and immunity – which during non-pandemic times would be treated with respect and engender controlled studies. But the need to have a consistent party-line trumps the usual questioning and discussion leading to hypothesis generation and testing with a well-designed study. A hypothesis does not become a thesis until tested and confirmed. Too many of us, myself included, jump to conclusions if the hypothesis sounds good.

“Feasible misinformation. That’s always been the game in politics,” I said to Fran, one of the people who comes in to help clean the house. We were discussing the recent depressing federal election.

“But the problem now is it’s in everything,” Fran said. Yes, of course it is, thanks to the unrestrained super-spreaders *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

Now this is my real reason for warbling on about misinformation. I’ve become increasingly disturbed – morphing towards anger – about the disruption to the lives of vaccinated patients going on now within our hospitals. Excepting a few genuine medically excused, the unvaccinated fall into one or two of four buckets: the arrogant, the ignorant, the apprehensive and the apathetic. They are diverting medical help from those who have done the right thing. They age-range from silly millennials to old crackpots.

A dear relative of mine is in hospital with Alzheimer’s – in a locked unit – and has been so for two months. The ward has a reduced nurse-patient ratio, hard-pressed doctors and support staff, and no day-support programs. We have many suffering big delays in hip and knee replacements, and renal and other transplants. These unvaccinated fatheads filling up the wards can walk outside and take the sun, whereas my relative, who has devoted her life to helping adolescents in Edmonton and school children in Calgary, is unable to go out unaccompanied. She has been transitioned for placement, but long-term care facilities are full, and she is assessed a daily rate for her continuing care in the acute hospital while the unvaccinated chumps and numpties walk out grinning.

Rather than impunity, surely these people deserve an invoice for the cost of their care. After so many public health warnings and pleadings, and the continued half-witted misinformation they circulate, even a small penalty – a payment of a daily rate for their time in hospital – would be appropriate. They shouldn’t have been there in the first place.

American medical insurance companies are simply jacking up their rates for those without proof of vaccination. Good idea.

Editor’s note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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