

A note on the classification of disinformation
by W. Hofkirchner, 3 December 2020

Following an invitation to an informal discussion of scholars on how to classify disinformation manifestations, I prepared a table on the relation of information and disinformation (see table).

This table is based upon the Triple-C Model information categories of cognition, communication and co-operation – which are concretised for the social realm as reflexion, understanding and intention – and on three qualitative types nesting each other for each category – observation, finding and judgement for reflexion, symbols, arguments and calls for action for understanding, and sociable concern, partners' agreement and societal consent for intentions. The relation is such that, first, any lower-complex category (ordered along an increase in complexity from the bottom to the top) and, second, any lower-complex type (ordered along an increase in complexity from the left to the right) provides the precondition for the higher-complex category or type that is contingent on the former, while it is also shaped by the latter. For example, the type "finding" of the category "reflexion" is the precondition for the type "arguments" of the category "understanding" as well as for the type "judgement" of the same category and is shaped by those types.

Any type is termed accordingly to inhere a specific quality. That quality can be measured. The more it inheres of that quality, the better it fulfils its typical function. For example, a finding shall realise the quality of truth. The more a finding is true, the better is the finding. Findings can be more or less true. Falsity is the opposite of truth. If a finding is false, it is not a finding anymore but a failed finding.

The idea is to define disinformation as failed information, irrespective of whether the failure occurs by happenstance or by conscious deliberation. Not only do information types inhere a characteristic vector according to their function but also generic information itself has a generic function: the generation of information shall increase the complexity of systems in order to enable them to handle the complexity of what challenges them. This is what – in the wake of W. Ross Ashby – can be called the Law of the Generable Requisite Information. Information empowers. Since disinformation disempowers, it is detrimental to the genuine function of information.

The closer you come to the types on the top and to the right, the more ethically essential are those types. The type with the highest complexity is "societal consent". Its inherent quality is normativity for all, its failure is anomy. Failures in the other types further anomy. The failure in societal consent touches the root cause of why disinformation exists: antagonistic social relations in social systems.

Disinformation is the stumbling block for the implementation of what I call the Imperative of the Information Age. The column to the right thematises global governance as new challenge for the intentions, global dialogue as new challenge for understanding and global citizenship as new challenge for reflexion, which can only be mastered if types and qualities will be adapted and ICTs will be developed for proper use not failing the required new functionality.