

The Dark Side of Speech

A Disenchanted Report on the
Decade that Preceded the Invasion
of Ukraine

Carlo Penco
University of Genoa

Series in Communication



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Preface

John Perry

Fifty years ago, when the internet was just getting started, it seemed it would lead to a great new era of information and communication. And it did. Email provides us with wonderful ways of communicating --- no faster than a telephone, but better in many other ways. Complicated ideas that require being typed out to get clear can be exchanged almost instantaneously, and the recipient can download the ideas and contemplate them over minutes or hours or months in their full complexity. Joint projects among people thousands of miles apart became easy. Indeed, communicating with a colleague in Wisconsin or Paris or China is often easier than driving all the way to campus to talk to a colleague there. People with unusual interests, with no one in their vicinity to talk to about those interests, can become part of groups of people spread around the world with similar interests. And then came Zoom. People from all over the world can meet face to face. What a boon for the cooperative development of knowledge!

But there turned out to be a downside, a downside that now affects our lives throughout much of the world. The internet turns out to be an incredible tool for developing and spreading misinformation, and especially disinformation, that is, intentional misinformation. It allows groups of ignorant, gullible people and, even worse, ill-intentioned and even simply basically evil persons to work efficiently in groups to develop and spread their misunderstandings and lies to others.

Misinformation has always been with us. But one might suppose that information has a certain advantage. Facts determine the success or failure of actions. Beliefs determine which actions we take. True beliefs lead to success, false ones to failure. So we suppose, with Mill,

Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it.¹

If so, it seems that if we have freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of all the media we now have to bring us information, information should have the edge on misinformation and disinformation. And so it has

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 2nd edition, London, John W Parker and son, 1859, p. 39.

seemed in many places where people are not punished for their opinions, newspapers and other media are free from government interference, and teachers, scientists, and other academics are able to pursue the truth as best they can and are expected to be honest and forthright about their evidence.

Those of us who lived in such places in the last century saw ourselves at a distinct advantage in arriving at the truth over those who did not, like the occupants of Germany and Italy before World War II, and the occupants of Russia and its satellites later.

But by now, by the second and third decades of the twenty-first century, things seem to be changing in a frightening way. In America, the party of Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt is dominated by systematic purveyors of disinformation. A major television network thrives by providing large groups of people with misinformation. The internet has played a huge role in making this with the disinformation they want. Parents find their children absorbing more misinformation from the internet than information from their schools.

To deal with this, we must understand it. Carlo Penco has produced a book that can help us tremendously in doing so. Penco tells us a great deal about the present state of disinformation, and how it came to be. Pick a topic: antisemitism, climate-change denial, racial stereotypes, Brexit --- what have you --- and you will likely find the pertinent historical facts. Many of us have heard of *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, a book that allegedly shows powerful Jews conspiring to dominate the world, quoted by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. Where did it come from? You can find the story in this book. Something called QAnon has been a huge influence on the deterioration of the Republican Party and the upsurge of nutty right-wingism in America. Penco tells where it came from. What sort of misinformation and disinformation led to Brexit? The book is a goldmine of information about all kinds of episodes of disinformation and its effects.

But it is also much more than that. Penco is a philosopher, and he probes the philosophical issues that the disinformation boom poses. What are facts? Are there really, as Kellyanne Conway supposes, alternative facts? What is the relation between facts and information? Has the desirability of freedom of expression been eroded by the disinformation revolution?

What to do with this book? Read it from start to finish; it is fascinating. Alternatively, pick out a topic, study the index, and learn all about it. I think the book would make a great text for an undergraduate course --- a semester or even a year. But by picking one topic or another, historical or philosophical or a combination, one could put together a great lecture or a seminar. If you find your kids seduced by bullshit from the internet, set them down and explain where it really came from. And for that matter, use the book to help determine whether your own beliefs are information or disinformation.

So, thanks to Carlo Penco for this wonderful tool to help us work our way through the era of disinformation we seem to have wandered into.

Introduction

Why did I write this book? In 2014, I was a visiting scholar at the Institute of Philosophy in London and had been invited to the University of East Anglia for a talk on Wittgenstein and Einstein. There, for the first time, I realized how successful UKIP's program to get out of Europe was. On the one hand, Scotland was losing the referendum for independence from the UK, and on the other hand, a right-wing nationalist party wanted UK independence from Europe. To me, this seemed totally bizarre.

But no, they became the first in the European election that brought Nigel Farage to the European Parliament. When the UK proposed the referendum, I was absolutely stunned when "leave" won. I had always gone to the UK since the 1970s, almost every year, and felt at home, and I had always thought of the UK as part of that great European culture of which Shakespeare and Dante, Locke and Voltaire, Newton and Leibniz, Einstein and Turing, and Mozart and the Beatles are part. Something is broken that will take decades to fix. Along with this, nationalism and far-right ideologies are developing and corroding the civic fabric of Europe and, simultaneously, of the United States, where the most unpredictable figure was elected to be president.

In 2019, I began writing this book as a critical reminder of what happened approximately in the second decade of the twenty-first century. We may think of the decade 2012-2022 starting with the year of Obama's re-election and ending with Queen Elisabeth's death. It is easy to set boundaries for this incredible decade. You may choose other relevant events: for instance, the 2012 was the year of revolutionary Hinton's paper on deep neural networks, of FBI repression of Anonymous activists supporting Assange, of Twitter's introduction of Vizify analytics, and of Putin's re-election as President of Russia. For the end of the decade, we may think of 2022 as the first realization of new kinds of AI dialogue systems, the diffusion of QAnon in Europe, the end of "Twitter," which became "X," and the invasion of Ukraine, all events of which I had almost no idea when I began writing this book.

The topic of my book is "deception". I take it as an umbrella term under which we may study disinformation, fake news, misleading narratives, post-truth, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. I am going to offer a critical comment on a variety of deceptions that led so many people to adhere to the most awkward explanations of events. I don't propose "new" theories, but I try to put things together like the pieces of a puzzle, presenting theories and events and inviting the reader to draw their own conclusions from examples framed in a context of discussion.

My intention, as a philosopher of language, is to help construct an analysis of the new ways in which disinformation is working to destroy our civil coexistence. At an international conference in Paris in 2017, while discussing the basic ideas of Paul Grice, Robert Stalnaker (M.I.T.) concluded that it was an irony that Grice's notions of cooperation, common ground, and the rationality of discourse should help us explain how language is used to subvert rational communication. I decided to follow his suggestion and attempt to give some clarifications on the subversion of rational communication we have before our eyes.

However, the academic literature on different ways of deceiving is enormous. I decided to avoid proper academic treatment and instead give just a few hints about theories and basic tools emerging from a part of academic literature, what is now called the "social philosophy of language." These conceptual tools include topics like speech acts, presuppositions, implicatures, and other concepts mainly taken from linguistic pragmatics or epistemology. My strategy will be to mix those hints from some of the most relevant theories with analyses of many specific examples. Often, we learn more easily from a well-presented example than from sophisticated theoretical subtleties that are fundamental in the research environment.

I need to explain why I have chosen this title. In philosophy, there are many ways to discuss what speech is, among them the idea that speech is a kind of action. Our speech acts have both content and force. The content is what can be evaluated as true or false. The force is the way in which we present the content so that we may persuade people to perform physical actions. The force of language is the ability to change things in the world, like when we ask somebody to open a door. We say, "Open the door, please," and, because of our utterance, the door can be opened without any movement on our part, but the uttering of those words. Our utterance influences the hearer, causing them to open the door. We speak, and others perform an action following what we say. I thought of an analogy with the idea of "force" in the *Star Wars* saga, where the force is something good, but it has a dark side. However, there is no need to recur to something magic: people are persuaded to perform bad actions, even to kill, by speeches they believe to be true. The difference between persuading people to open a door or persuading people to kill exemplifies the difference between the simple and basic "light side" of our everyday speech and the dangerous "dark side" of the force of speech. To keep the analogy, philosophers and computer scientists might be considered the contemporary Jedi of the battle against the evil, with the acknowledgment that there is no such clear distinction between good and evil as in a movie. We are not in a movie.

A short summary of the book will help the reader understand different ways to read it. While the fourth part is a reminder of a set of tools to better understand

the workings of deception and the dangers of self-confidence, the first three parts of the book may be considered a reminder of the development of the dark side of speech in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In a fast-developing flux of information, it is too easy to forget what happened just a few years ago, but what happened in the second decade of the twenty-first century contained the seeds of what happened later.

Each part of the book contains twelve short chapters that can be read autonomously. I present well-known facts, mainly concerning the USA and Europe, showing how deception guided most actions and events, from reaction to COVID-19 to voting behavior or attacks on innocent people. They may also be considered an assessment for the less informed; often, people in the USA don't look at what is happening in Europe and vice-versa. In summarizing and commenting on some facts, I keep my attention on the linguistic tricks and methods used to deceive hearers or readers. Speaking of so many things, my short chapters only scratch the surface of events and theories. Their role is to stimulate the reader to go deeper in understanding the point treated. At the end of each chapter, I joke about the moral of the story with a single sentence as a form of defense against the dark side of speech.

Part 1, on **alternative facts**, mainly deals with *basic notions* such as propaganda, post-truth, disinformation, and fake news. I will give some definitions and references to relevant literature, and on the other hand, I will propose examples of "fake news" and "alternative facts". A list of various methods of deception (such as malicious uses of pictures or videos) prepares a detailed analysis of the so-called "Pizzagate," the mother of all fake news, and the growth of the environment that promoted it, from 4chan to QAnon. After a discussion on "coronavirus hoax" and a discussion of "scientific" fake news, I conclude with a more general presentation on the role of assertion in spreading disinformation.

Part 2, on **narratives**, mainly deals with the *content of disinformation*. After introducing the notion of conspiracy theory and the main theories about it, I provide examples ranging from flat earth to the "great replacement," Holocaust denial, and COVID-19 denial. The idea behind this part is to understand with detailed examples the power of a "narrative," which is a way of framing an issue to persuade people to follow certain beliefs and actions. The common core of these examples is that most kinds of narratives arise from the inner need to find an explanation for what happens around us and to follow shortcuts that make the explanation simple and easy to spread.

Part 3, on **algorithms**, mainly deals with the *methods of disinformation*, starting with the idea of cognitive warfare as it was applied to influence important elections and the Brexit Referendum. Having an idea of the role of algorithms can help us understand what is at stake in this new kind of warfare, in which algorithms

help promote disinformation that has real-world consequences: inciting violence, opposing actual freedom of speech, and undermining freedom of the press. Here we find the different attitudes of the US and Europe, with the latter being more active in trying to preserve fundamental values like privacy and human creativity and the former being more active in defending freedom of expression.

Part 4 on **emergency tools**, mainly deals with *how to react to disinformation*. Many books and essays provide confrontations among different theories. I will be short and to the point, only lightly touching on the sophisticated discussions of experts. The aim of the chapter is to present some tools to understand the most subtle linguistic tricks of deception. I will introduce some minimal technical terminology about fallacies, implicatures, presuppositions, and bias, and I will leave the examples to speak for themselves.

Given the structure of the book, the reader will sometimes find the same topics in different contexts; the same examples are approached with different intents or different viewpoints. I will indicate some links to other parts of the book where examples used to illustrate a single point or problem are better developed or used for illustrating a different worry. Each chapter has a short summary that specifies the kind of contribution: some sections are mostly descriptive, some more theoretical. To help the reader, I suggest three possible ways in which to read the book:

- First, read the chapters with the titles that interest you. Avoiding the annoying and continuous reference to the literature, either enjoy or criticize what I say using your arguments and alternative examples. Each chapter is thought to be read as an autonomous piece on the subject under discussion.
- Second, read the entire book as an introduction to the use of deception in the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is a history with examples and ideas that get more and more complex as the book goes on.
- Third, use the book as a tool for delving deeper into the various topics covered, as well as a repository of information that may become lost over time. On the one hand, I referred (mostly in the footnotes) to books and research essays that permit a deeper analysis of the topic treated; on the other, I made a lot of references to news articles that touch upon a single event. It may appear redundant, but often the devil is in the details.

P.S.

The overabundant reference to literature is often needed to justify assertions that may seem preposterous or invented (such as a prohibition on selling toothpaste to cure COVID-19 disease). Given the range of time, some parts of the book might seem obsolete, but they will work as examples of what lies behind future events. I will mostly leave out of my book two relevant topics linked to disinformation: the question of climate change and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. On the former, being the most important problem of today, it would be almost impossible to say something relevant about different ways of deception in a few pages. On the latter, I will occasionally discuss elements directly exemplifying some aspects of deception, but I will not deal with the political and diplomatic issues nor with the possible “causes” of the conflict. I also wanted to keep the time restriction (2012-2022), as tight as I could, even if in a few places (especially in footnotes) I refer to some updates.

PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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Below is a list of cited books, official reports, and relevant articles from scientific journals, blogs, magazines, videos, and News sites. In these years, I continuously checked different news sites. I used two browsers: on one, I followed traditional or liberal sites (Atlantic, BBC News, CNN, Le Monde, The New York Times, Washington Post, Der Spiegel, La Folha, La Stampa and others) and on the other, I followed right-wing or more openly conspirative sites (AOL, Breitbart News, Epoch Times, Fox News, Infowars, New York Post, OAN, Russia Today, Sputnik). I quoted often for backing my reports on facts or explicit viewpoints, and every time I chose the references that I thought best represented the situation under discussion (often verifying on different sources). All references from 2022 have been last seen between October and December 2022, and references from 2023 have been verified between September and October 2023. If you find some links no longer working (it may happen to sites recently shut down), you may resort to Web Archive (web.archive.org).

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