

## Twitter Thread by Dr N. Brodie ■■■■



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**We need to understand misinformation & disinformation as systems, not just individual actions. An economy of false information.**

**[this thread continues from what I posted last night, about some of the most prominent South African misinfo posters]**

When I started teaching courses on false information systems a few years ago at Wits, I made a point to look at it systemically: there are producers of information, distribution channels/platforms, and audiences (which can also distribute/reshare content).

To try and understand the types of false information, I also felt it was important to look at the intention/motivation of the producers of the false info. What motivated them? Money? Notoriety? Political agenda? (all of these types are in play)

It's NB to understand motive of the false info maker so you can effectively disrupt or correct their false and/or harmful information. A guy in it for clicks/fame requires different strategy to a paid actor or propagandist – although both messages/content may be the same

What we're seeing with Covid-19 misinfo is that the content created and shared by deniers is effectively the same as the conspiracy theories shared by lobbies that are anti-government, anti-media, or who blame Soros etc. This is not an accident, although original motives diverge

Re: my thread last night, my thought process was that it is possibly not productive to engage directly with peddlers of false info. We will not change their minds. So that means we have to look at engaging more robustly with platforms (distribution channels) and audiences

Having worked in fact-checking for several years, I believe that understanding why audiences buy in to false info is really complex, and not singular at all. Not to say we shouldn't engage, but it's a massive and intricate thing.

2020 was also a very solid example of what happens when mass audiences are presented with massive amounts of novel information that they are not yet skilled at filtering or interpreting (oh, and after years of being told not to trust experts, scientists, media etc)

Fact-checking should never be only the domain of fact-checkers. Like a vaccine, it works best when the most number of people are equipped with the 'mental immune system' response to dodgy claims. But this will also take time...

It's also not just about teaching or enabling people to become their own fact-checkers, it is also about learning (all of us included) how to use good quality sources, and how to check our inherent, inherited and learned biases that stop us from being able to assess information

People don't suddenly wake up one morning and believe the government is creating a global hoax relating to Covid deaths. To believe that, they have to already believe that governments are capable of mass-scale lies, that their government is trying to 'put one over' on them...

On top of all of that, there is a global phenomenon we are calling the infowar. It is a large scale propaganda effort, aimed at driving erosion of trust in governments, in science, in media. It is quite effective, and decentralised.

What Covid has done & shown, is how the infowar has weaponised social cracks caused by the pandemic + used it to lobby people from one cause to others. You start off disliking the government & railing against any lockdown, next thing you're sharing conspiracy theories about masks

Social media also encourages an actual bio-chemical response to info exchange that is more rapid than existed before. We get a literal kick from attention/engagement. This does not drive positive behaviour, it drives behaviour that generates a dopamine kick

Last night I highlighted that even fact-checkers (and I include my own behaviour here) fall prey to this, and sometimes we allow the search for gratification to drive our posts, rather than the actual desire to share correct information. We're human too.

No doubt I will discuss audience susceptibility more in future – but for now I am starting with trying to understand how I can do better in sharing corrections/refuting false claims. And also hoping [@Twitter](#) and FB etc can also step up to stop harmful information sharing.