

# Disinformation: The Use of False Information<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract.** The distinction between misinformation and disinformation becomes especially important in political, editorial, and advertising contexts, where sources may make deliberate efforts to mislead, deceive, or confuse an audience in order to promote their personal, religious, or ideological objectives. The difference consists in having an agenda. It thus bears comparison with lying, because “lies” are assertions that are false, that are known to be false, and that are asserted with the intention to mislead, deceive, or confuse. One context in which disinformation abounds is the study of the death of JFK, which I know from more than a decade of personal research experience. Here I reflect on that experience and advance a preliminary “theory of disinformation” that is intended to stimulate thinking on this increasingly important subject. Five kinds of disinformation are distinguished and exemplified by real life cases I have encountered. It follows that the story you are about to read is true.

**Key words:** assassination, *Assassination Science*, disinformation, fabricated evidence, JFK, misinformation, *Murder in Dealey Plaza*, *The Warren Report*

## 1. Introduction

While “misinformation” can be simply defined as false, mistaken, or misleading information, “disinformation” entails the distribution, assertion, or dissemination of false, mistaken, or misleading information in an intentional, deliberate, or purposeful effort to mislead, deceive, or confuse (Fetzer, 2003). It might therefore be described as “misinformation with an attitude”. Among the most complex contexts in which it occurs turns out to be the study of the death of JFK. For reasons that become clear to those who have a serious interest in this subject and pursue it far enough, there are powerful interests who would prefer that the truth not be known. During the years since 1992, I have worked with some of the most highly qualified persons to ever study this case and have encountered at least five kinds of disinformation “up close and personal”. This is a theoretical analysis of my true-life experiences.

Sometimes the source of disinformation is acknowledged (let us call this “overt” disinformation), but sometimes it is concealed by providing no identification or by providing misleading identification (call this “covert”). The quantity and quality of disinformation can be difficult to judge, but it should be viewed more or less on a par with acts of lying. Indeed, the parallel with lying appears to be fairly precise.

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Individuals commit lies when (a) they make assertions (as though they were true), (b) which they know to be false (c) with the intent to mislead. Not all cases of false assertions qualify as “lies”. Those that reflect simple ignorance, for example, do not ascend to the level of lies, nor do assertions that are sincere but happen to be false.

Even false claims that a person knows to be false that are asserted deliberately do not ascend to the level of lies, when there is no intention to mislead. Those, such as comics, who ridicule a public figure by suggesting that he is dumber than a post (is missing his brain, and so on), are making assertions that are (literally) false, that they know are (literally) false, yet they do not ascend to the level of lies since there is no intent to deceive. In the case of disinformation, the motives that tend bring about lying (such as to preserve a relationship, to conceal an affair, or to secure a loan) are typically displaced by other – often political, sometimes sinister – objectives and goals.

## 2. The Targets of Attack

The research in which I have engaged over the past ten years has led to the preparation of lectures, conduct of symposia, organization of conferences, publication of articles, and, most importantly, also of two edited books, *Assassination Science* (1998) and *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2000). As will become apparent, they have been generally well received and even acclaimed, apart from targeted attacks that are the subject of this discussion. Since it would be useful to have some idea of the contents of these books without having to review all of their details, summaries may be found on Amazon.com and other places. As an aspect of its 2001 Centennial Celebration, for example, the American Philosophical Association featured these books as “applications of philosophical analysis to an issue of public interest” ([www.apa.udel.edu/apa/centennial/](http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/centennial/)), where they are highlighted today.

The summary for *Assassination Science* (1998) reads as follows: “A collaborative effort by highly qualified scientists, physicians, and scholars aimed at placing the study of the assassination of the 35th President of the United States on an objective and scientific foundation. A Ph.D. in physics who is an M.D. and board-certified in radiation oncology establishes that certain autopsy X-rays have been fabricated to conceal a massive blow-out to the back of the head (caused by a shot from in front) and others have been altered by adding a 6.5 mm metallic object (in an evident effort to implicate a 6.5 mm weapon). A world authority on the human brain who is also an expert on wound ballistics concludes that the brain shown in diagrams and photographs in the National Archives (the brain itself is long missing) cannot be the brain of JFK.

“A physician who attended the dying President and two days later his accused assassin supplies diagrams of the wounds as they appeared at Parkland Hospital (a small entry wound to the throat, a massive gaping wound to the back of the head). Others contribute studies questioning the authenticity of the Zapruder home

movie of the assassination, which appears to have been extensively edited using sophisticated techniques (including removal of whole frames, sequences of frames, and alteration within frames). Emphasis throughout on critical thinking and matters of methodology, with attention to the role of inference to the best explanation. A leading critic of *The Warren Report*, Cyril H. Wecht, M.D., J.D., Past President of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, says these studies “unquestionably” shift the burden of proof in this case.

My summary for *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2000) similarly reads as follows: “The surge of interest in the assassination of President Kennedy that resulted from Oliver Stone’s ‘JFK’ led to the creation of a 5-member civilian Assassination Records Review Board entrusted with authority to declassify records related to his assassination. This book finds support for the existence of a large-scale conspiracy and meticulous cover-up in the 60,000 documents and records released by the board. It begins with a Prologue elaborating 16 ‘smoking guns’ that display the untenability of the government’s position, followed by a 100-page chronology of events in Dealey Plaza that day, studies of the conduct of the Secret Service, the destruction of the Presidential limousine, analyses of the medical evidence, including a careful dissection of the exact way in which the cover-up was carried out (reshooting the autopsy photographs, for example), ARRB studies of the examination of two brains, the Zapruder film’s presence at the National Photographic Interpretation Center run by the CIA the weekend of the murder, and new studies of evidence of alteration of the film itself. Includes an early essay by Bertrand Russell. Emphasis again is placed on key methodological issues, especially the application of Occam’s Razor. Michael Kurtz, an historian who has published his own book on this case, observes of this collection that anyone who reads it ‘will be appalled by the systematic distortion of the truth – that JFK died as the result of a conspiracy – by certain officials of the US government’.”

### 3. Disinformation of Type Five

On the basis of my experience in more than a decade since I first became seriously involved in research on the death of JFK, I have had to deal with many different kinds of attacks and criticism, some of which have been sincere and well-intended, others of which have not. I have speculated that there have to be at least five different types, levels, or degrees of disinformation. It may therefore be useful to provide illustrations of several of these types of disinformation, especially of the fifth and the fourth types, where simply advancing incomplete, inaccurate, or false assertions does not qualify as “disinformation” in the sense intended here, because of the absence of intention. (More discussion can be found on my JFK research website, [www.assassinationscience.com](http://www.assassinationscience.com).)

The fifth level of disinformation occurs when a source presents information that has been deliberately selected to misrepresent, distort, or abuse the target with the intention to mislead. Citing only evidence that is favorable to one side, as though

no contrary evidence exists, is known as *special pleading*. A common variety of fifth degree efforts is creating – usually by writing – entire new works (books or articles), because of which it has the character of *fabricating evidence*. Recent examples that display this tendency include Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* (1993), articles in *JAMA* (the *Journal of the AMA*), and Seymour Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot* (1997).

In his review of *Case Closed* (Wrone, 1995), David Wrone, one of a small but crucial group of historians who study the assassination, makes these observations:

Gerald Posner argues that the Warren Commission properly investigated the assassination of JFK. He claims to have refuted the critics, purports to show what actually occurred, and asserts simple factual answers to explain complex problems that have plagued the subject for years. In the process he condemns all who do not agree with the official conclusions as theories driven by conjecture. At the same time his book is so theory driven, so rife with speculation, and so frequently unable to conform his text with the factual content in his sources that it stands as one of the stellar instances of irresponsible reporting on this subject. (Wrone, 1995, p. 186)

So if the evidence doesn't support your point of view, ignore it, dismiss it, or fabricate it. Moreover, if Posner had a serious interest in the truth, then the timing of his book was very odd because, as George Costello (1994) has remarked, some 60 000 new documents and records were in the process of being released by the Assassination Records Review Board – evidence that this author apparently did not want to consider!

The indications Posner had to have known better are so numerous and so detailed – many of which may be located on my web site – that it is difficult to make the case for incompetence rather than corruption. Similar considerations obtain for *The Dark Side of Camelot*, which Wrone (1998) summarizes with the following condemnation:

In an interview given on publication of his alleged expose of John F. Kennedy's private life and public policies, the famed investigative reporter Sy Hersh said he wanted to make a "big score" and retire. To this end, the Pulitzer Prize winner has prostituted his nation's history and, at the same time, sustained the intelligence and military forces that bitterly opposed JFK – those who among other infamies sunk us in Vietnam and who tried and failed to initiate nuclear war over Cuba. Hersh does it with a corruption of scholarship perhaps unequaled in recent times. (Wrone, 1998)

Those unfamiliar with research in this area might find these remarks exaggerated or intemperate, but they are wholly justified. Those who review the evidence presented on my site, which includes Wrone's reviews, may even find that they are conservative.



#### 4. Disinformation of Type Four

While the prominence given to these books by the mass media makes these spectacular cases, especially when they have been foisted off upon an unsuspecting public as though they were responsible works, the experiences I have encountered with books of my own also exemplify the phenomenon. In 1998, for example, I published a collection of studies by eleven experts on the assassination, *Assassination Science* (1998), that took as its point of departure a set of irresponsible articles that had appeared in *JAMA*. An Amazon.com review posted by Jochen Peiper on 13 August 2001 claims that the book's "dishonesty" is revealed by "the constant harping that Lee H. Oswald, the murder of JFK and police officer Tippett (sic), was drinking a coke on the second floor of the TSBD [Texas School Book Depository] at the time of the killing of JFK." This incident, which appears to be true, however, is not even mentioned, much less discussed, in the book under review.

In *Murder in Dealey Plaza* (2000), I consider this on page 366, but that's another book. In other instances, the inference to *intent to deceive* involves more complex reasoning than citing non-existent passages. The fourth level of disinformation, for example, occurs, not when a work (a book or an article) is being written from scratch, but in creating a highly biased impression of a specific study by *simply ignoring* its most significant, important, or relevant features to mislead others about the contents of the work, which is another form of *special pleading*. Notice that anyone unfamiliar with the work – again, *Assassination Science* – would not be in the position to recognize that they were being duped by the author of another review. Consider the following.

In *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (18 January 1998, p. 10E), Ernst-Ulrich Franzen begins his review by describing the book as a response to material published in *JAMA*, which is correct, while denigrating it with the observation, "Some of the articles in this hodgepodge collection are too technical to be of interest to anyone except very dedicated assassination buffs or people who really want to know the details of what happens when a bullet hits a head". He claims there are some "interesting gems" that deserve wider dissemination than they are going to receive from being published in this book, such as "an article by Charles Crenshaw, a Dallas physician who has maintained that he saw evidence in the operating room of a shot that hit Kennedy from the front and wounds that were different from those reported at the autopsy", which he highly recommends.

He also praises David Mantik's "fascinating dismantling" of the Zapruder film that shows it could have been altered to depict only what officials wanted. Crenshaw had already published a book of his own, however, which meant his views were not news. And Franzen somehow fails to identify the new discoveries published here, including:

\* *that autopsy X-rays of JFK have been fabricated to conceal a massive blow-out to the back of his head and to impose a 6.5 mm metal object;*

- \* *that diagrams and photographs of a brain that are stored in the National Archives must be of some brain other than that of John Fitzgerald Kennedy;*
- \* *that JFK alone was hit at least four times (once in the throat from in front, once in the back from behind, and twice in the head, once from behind and once from in front);*
- \* *that a minimum of at least six shots had to have been fired during the assassination, including a hit to Governor John Connally and a miss that injured a bystander; and,*
- \* *that Lee Harvey Oswald was framed using manufactured evidence, including the famous “backyard” photographs.*

Since these findings are introduced in the “Preface”, elaborated in the “Prologue”, and substantiated throughout the rest of the book, it is difficult to imagine how the author could possibly have missed them. But no one would know from reading his review.

## 5. Other Types of Disinformation

As it happens, both books have fared well. *Assassination Science* is now in its fifth printing, while *Murder in Dealey Plaza* is in its sixth. On 6 June 2001, of 1132 titles listed under the heading, “Assassination”, on Amazon.com, *Murder in Dealey Plaza* was ranked #1 and *Assassination Science* #2 in the categories of *Bestselling* and of *Featured Items*. At one point, *Murder* even displaced Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the perennial all-time favorite, as #1 in the category of U.S. history/20th century/1960s, which must be one of the memorable moments of my life. Talking trash has not killed them with the public, and a very favorable review of *Murder* has been published in *The Federal Lawyer*, a magazine for attorneys who appear before the Supreme Court, who argue with federal agencies, or who practice in federal courts (Costello, 2001). This review has even received a prize. The mass media, however, studiously avoid mentioning the books or the findings they convey.

The third level of disinformation occurs by abusing the man (the *ad hominem*) by attacking the author or editor of a work on irrelevant or misleading grounds that have little or nothing to do with the position the author or editor represents. A recent example involved an attack from someone identified only by the email alias “dxmivi” on the ground that several of my books – including *Philosophy and Cognitive Science* – are published by Paragon House, a company owned by the Moonies, which is a nice example of the classic smear by character assassination or of guilt by association. No mention is made of my complete freedom to publish without interference of any kind or that these books were in good series with reputable editors. Indeed, this particular book is not only in its second edition but has been published in Portuguese translation.

The second level of disinformation occurs when available evidence that is relevant and therefore ought to make a difference to some conclusion, hypothesis, or conjecture under examination is simply dismissed or ignored. Evidence is relevant, after all, when its presence or absence (physical evidence) or its truth or falsity (testimonial) makes a difference to the truth or falsity of the point at issue. *Rationality of Belief* occurs when we distribute our strength of belief in proportion to degrees of support supplied by available relevant evidence. Disinformation may often appear to violate this principle and qualify as irrationality of belief. On the other hand, insincere or corrupt forms of irrationality of belief may be displayed in exercising *Rationality of Action* as a means appropriate to attain a specific aim, objective or goal. If you cannot honestly discredit a position, perhaps you can cope with it by fabricating evidence or by suppressing it.

The first level of disinformation might equally well be characterized as apparent incompetence by someone who assumes the task of offering a critique when it is one that he is not well-positioned to provide. This may be due to any number of factors, including lack of mental acumen, specific misunderstandings, or a lack of familiarity with relevant evidence (simple ignorance). Since none of us knows all there is to know about anything – especially in relation to complex and contentious matters such as the death of JFK – it can be difficult to resist the temptation to describe those with whom you disagree as falling into this category. Of course, they may say the same about you. The problem thus becomes one of sorting things out to arrive at reasonable judgments.

## 6. Disputing the Definition

Precisely because the definition of “disinformation” implies the intent to deceive, its usage can provoke controversy. Some students of the JFK assassination, for example, appeal to alternative definitions to suggest that its use is rarely justifiable, because it implies knowledge that the person who disseminates disinformation has to work for some shadowy government agency. A definition of that kind would be the following:

(D1) disinformation = df carefully contrived misinformation prepared by an intelligence service for the purpose of misleading, deluding, disrupting, or undermining confidence in individuals, organizations, or governments. (Carl, 1990, p. 110)

But this conception “loads the dice” by introducing a conception that is both stronger and narrower than appropriate. Certainly, the columnists, politicians, and lobbyists who deliberately disseminate misinformation with the intention to deceive do not have to use material *prepared by an intelligence service* for the purposes implied.

A more discriminating definition has been advanced that separates the agenda from the source. This conception appears to have advantages over definition (D1):

(D2) disinformation = df the deliberate dissemination of false information by persons who may or may not receive compensation but who have a specific agenda to counter truth. To call someone “an agent of disinformation” implicates both them and their agenda. (Cf. J. White, 2001a)

On definition (D2), “misinformation” can be false information disseminated without an agenda by those who are either unfamiliar with the evidence or cognitively impaired. A very similar suggestion has come from a British student of the case:

With regard to the dis/mis information debate, I think we can all agree that differences of opinion will occur. This may be the result of someone being MISinformed, which is (normally) an innocent occurrence, but which may in turn be the result of DISinformation: the deliberate dissemination of known false material or the misrepresentation of true facts. (Cf. M. White, 2001b)

These conceptions appear to accord far better with the situation we encounter in the world today, where dominant economic entities, including major corporations, may have powerful financial incentives to provide false and misleading depiction’s of their affairs, a phenomenon recently illustrated by the total collapse of ENRON. Disinformation in sense (D2), unlike sense (D1), does not have to be disseminated by an intelligence service.

As though more evidence were needed that disinformation can come in many guises, those who are completing their income tax returns for 2001 will discover that the much touted “tax rebate” checks they have received were not actually “rebates” at all but advances against future payments-due that have the effect of *increasing* your tax due by the precise amount of the *refund* received (Milstead, 2001). Form 1040 has been designed to make it nearly impossible to realize how these rebate checks affect your taxes due in 2002. “I think people think what they are getting is a refund of taxes they paid in 2001’, said Gary Dudley, the tax partner-in-charge at Deloitte & Touche’s Denver office. ‘If they think their taxes were going to show up lower on 15 April (from this change), they’re not” (Milstead, 2001). Can the dissemination of false information in this case have been accidental?

## 7. The Warren Commission Report

By now, it should be obvious, if the only definition available to us were of the kind provided by (D1), we would still need a broader and weaker definition of the kind provided by (D2), precisely as we would need a broader and weaker concept of *nformation* if the only concept of *information* we had implied truth (Fetzer, 2003).



In offering this analysis of different kinds of disinformation, I build on my expertise with regard to critical thinking. No doubt, my experience in dealing with research on the assassination of JFK has heightened my sensitivity to distinctions that others might be inclined to ignore or overlook between information, misinformation, and disinformation. In this day and age, we all have to become experts on disinformation.

I have been privileged to collaborate with some of the most highly-qualified individuals to ever study the death of JFK, including a world authority on the human brain who is also an expert on wound ballistics; a Ph.D. in physics who is also a physician and board certified in radiation oncology; a physician who assisted in treating the moribund President and then, ironically, two days later, his alleged assassin; a renowned expert on photographic evidence, who not only assisted the House Select Committee during its 1977–78 reinvestigation but also advised Oliver Stone in preparing his film, “JFK”; and other experts on different aspects of the case. Our research, alas!, suggests that “JFK”, while simpler than reality by half, is the most accurate, complete, and comprehensive presentation of what happened on 22 November 1963 ever provided through the mass media.

Readers may now be in the position to begin to appreciate the words of Cyril H. Wecht, M.D., J.D., Past President of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, who endorsed *Assassination Science* by observing that these “investigative studies unquestionably shift the evidentiary burden to those who through ignorance, naiveté, or conscious pro-government bias continue to defend *The Warren Commission Report*, the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people”. Those words may sound exaggerated to some but, as one who has devoted a substantial effort to come to grips with the truth in this complicated affair, they are exactly right. The government has used false information to conceal, deceive, and confuse the public about the death of JFK in the past, a deception, alas!, that it continues to practice skillfully to this day. This may be the most spectacular case of its kind in our history, but it is not unique.

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