Ancient versus Modern Series

'Approach to managing misinformation through time'

Compilation Date: February – April 2023

Authors:
Main Author: Erin Smylie – Researcher for Paragon Information Management Services Australia Pty Ltd, a recent graduate from La Trobe University with a Bachelor of Arts in Chinese Languages and Culture and Classics and Ancient History, and a member of the Golden Key International Honour Society.

Supported by: Tony Perry – Director of information and data management consulting company Paragon Information Management Services Australia Pty Ltd and long term information management specialist with over 30 years of experience having worked across multiple international regions including the UK, Europe, Norway, US, Canada, Middle East, India New Zealand and Australia and industries including oil and gas, mining, aeronautical, and the arts within both private and government sectors.

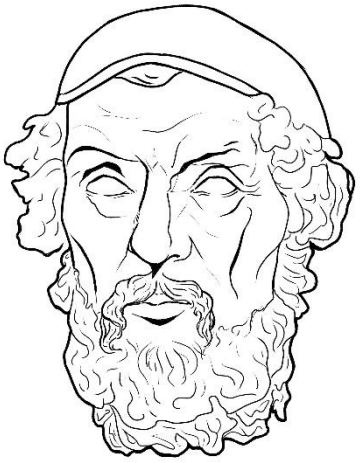
Illustrations by: Erin Smylie

Series Summary

When we talk about directions and the latest trends in information and data management, we often focus on the here and now without necessary looking at the historical influences that have helped steer us in our journey. This series of research papers and subsequent presentations will take us back in time to delve into aspects of our past and discuss the attitudes and approaches that may have impacted on the advancements of today. It is only through the advancement in collaboration, research and technology, that we have been able to uncover the approaches of the past to help steer our journey of the future.

PAPER - Approach to managing misinformation through time

It can be said that the human race is much like the information we depend upon, ancient and vulnerable. From language to politics, ancient Greek and Roman culture continue to heavily influence many modern societies. Thanks to the continuity of said culture, we have been left with an in-depth comparison of the attitudes towards accessing and preserving information, the presence of misinformation, and how all of this has been dealt with over time. With this, we have been equipped with the knowledge of thousands of years of consequences through our various means of handling potentially altered facts and data with which to determine whether or not technological advancements and human efforts can, in fact, quell the threat of misinformation.



Homer – Greek Orator
8th Century BC

There was a time when many people thought the written word was useless. Most famously, perhaps, being Homer, orator of the notorious tales the Iliad and the Odyssey, who failed to see the value in a tool that most modern societies depend upon for communicative purposes. Instead, stories of myth and legend, of war and of adventure, were passed down orally through what is called cultural memory: the passing down of the same story through generations. While we can sit and marvel at the dedication towards preserving tales of importance, it is indisputable that this tactic is wildly vulnerable to misinformation, purposeful alterations, and forgetfulness. What's more is that these stories were often altered in order to suit the ideologies of the current time period, the differing details of the same tales being used to help date that particular version and help to broaden modern understandings of ancient societies. In turn, this has meant that these alterations can potentially skew our knowledge of ancient realities. Consequently, there is no way of proving or disproving the accuracy of the details of these stories and historical accounts.

A similar vulnerability to misinformation was also found in ancient art. Much of which, it must be said, has been weathered by the hands of both time and nature, thus opening the door for interpretations of what the full, clear original would have been portraying. Art was, in many ways, a more valued form of communication than written documentation, varying from visualisations of cultural customs to tributes to the dead. However, the high regard with which art was held as a form of story-telling does not protect it from inaccuracy. In fact, many surviving pieces of ancient pottery, statues, and paintings depicting events, people, and customs were created by artists who were born *after* the content they were portraying, meaning there is a possibility that the information being presented was merely an improvised or misinformed version of the truth.

In ancient art we also see that ancient Greece and Rome had developed an intense interest in the body beautiful: being depicted as youthful, healthy, and attractive regardless of whether or not this was their true physique. This was especially prominent in sculpture and grave markers, meaning that artists who accepted commissions from wealthier people would depict real people in false fashion, perhaps depicting them as being more wealthy or successful than they truly had been. A distinct difference in modern approaches to information compared to the ancients is what they

found to be worth recording in the first place. Whilst it is not impossible to find ancient discussions of more mundane living, it was the general opinion that if any particular event was a daily occurrence, then what was the point in writing it down? Why put so much effort into recording the status quo when everyone already knew it? Consequentially, a majority of the ancient written texts available to us today are records of larger, more influential events such as (though not limited to) wars, plagues, and politics.

Something in addition to consider is that education and the ability to write such records of events was not offered to everyone. In fact, such an education was almost entirely limited to wealthy men. This, and knowing that the world these men lived in was wildly competitive and thrived on reputation, means that we must consider any possible exaggeration made to the events recorded in an attempt to make their works more interesting to read or more patriotic, and therefore more reputable. Livy, considered one of three greatest Roman historians, himself states that he is aware that historians making "extravagant claims is, and always has been, all too common" (*Livy, 1960 p29*). One example of this is the inconsistency of Thucydides' account of the plague of Athens in 430BCE. In this account, Thucydides writes that, because of the fear that this disease instilled in the public, those who refused to visit friends and family "perished from neglect" (*2.51.5*), but those who chose to visit would die after exposing themselves to the sickness, suggesting that death was inevitable for all who contracted this disease. In the next passage, however, he describes how *survivors* of the disease were congratulated and were removed of fear, as on the rare occasion that the disease was contracted by the same person more than once, it was never fatal (*2.51.6*). Perhaps this is Thucydides' attempt to dramatise the impact that the plague had on its victims in order to make for a more gripping read for his current and future readers. Regardless, the inconsistent and contradictory information has caused an uncertain account of a major health crisis that could have otherwise been a valuable insight into how the ancients handled epidemics. Another factor to consider with this account is that the symptoms of this sickness followed a particular downward pattern, starting from the head, down to the eyes, nose, and throat, then to the lungs, then the stomach, then bowels. This description of such an intelligent illness is rather suspicious, so much so that one can't help but consider that Thucydides was either unfamiliar with the specifics of the plague (therefore misrepresenting a topic he is ill-informed about) or lying about his own contraction of it.

This is not to say that historians are the only suppliers of potentially tampered information. There are plenty of areas that, today, we trust to be based on validated sources and approved information that, in antiquity, were simply lacking. Whether this is to do with law, politics, or even medicine, rhetoric was a tool that was considered to be more substantial than hard evidence. Such tool was taught in private schools to young men whose parents wished for them to pursue careers in law, public speaking, or politics in order to maintain wealth and a powerful reputation. Consider, when reading transcripts of ancient court proceedings, that the advocate is trained in the art of rhetoric and is solely motivated by performing the most convincing, aurally pleasing, and well-put together retelling of the case, regardless of accuracy. This means that the results of the case, as recorded, are potentially the outcome of well-articulated lies, or rather exaggerations, as opposed to truth.

Of course, there is by no means reason to devalue informative artefacts from antiquity, written or otherwise, as much of it needs little more than cross referencing to piece together a bigger picture. Instead, examples and circumstances such as those aforementioned ought to inspire awe at the technological advancements and the change of attitude toward information, sources, and accessibility we are accustomed to today.

When we look at the attitudes and creative habits of the ancient world, how could anyone not stand in wonder at the leaps and bounds we have made in information technology? Our attitudes towards preserving information have changed wildly, and for this advancement we can thank one of, if not the most important improvement in managing misinformation: the significantly wider access to education. Generally speaking, we are far more independent when it comes to accessing and deciphering information and are expected to rely on our own language and research skills in order to determine whether or not we trust the content we are being presented with. Although people do not always apply these skills for this reason, such independence truly sets us apart from our ancient counterparts. What's more is that we are encouraged to ask for sources and evidence to support the information we come in contact with and can typically rest assured that the exposure of lies or exaggerated content *will* be corrected, keeping information relevant by updating it when new data deems this necessary. This correction process revolves around both technological and human efforts.

For example, Virtual Private Networks (VPN's) and other such technologies are used to protect us from websites that are potentially traps disguised to seem safe. The issue with this is that such protection from the likes of online malware and misleading title pages does not come for free, limiting the access to safer information to those who can afford such protective services. In addition, we are more attuned to seeking out the accuracy of the information presented to us. Before we use information there is more of a focus on understanding the variables and concepts and discover errors or inconsistencies that could impact the accuracy. These approaches are much more advanced than that of our ancient predecessors.

Today we also see newly defined roles, such as the Misinformation Manager becoming more important in the workplace. Collaborating with professionals in areas such as design and information technology leads to a broader understanding of both the threats that misinformation holds on the content at focus and how to combat it. In an age where technology can be as unforgiving as it is useful, direct human interaction with data is imperative in ensuring that the information a company presents to clients is entirely trustworthy and validated.

Indeed, not relying entirely on technology and using more human intelligence is vital in preserving accurate information. What we have to remember is that the temptation to spread misinformation, especially in the hopes if being rewarded with attention, is largely based in human nature as opposed to technological misdeeds and is thus difficult to avoid. In many ways, we are just as vulnerable to misinformation as the ancients were. For instance, we are just as competitive a species today as we were thousands of years ago, constantly fighting to be the most respected and well-achieved person in the room. If anything, having such a wide range of platforms on which to distribute information increases the playing field for just about everyone, regardless of whether the motivation is professional or social. Much like the theory on Thucydides, this means that content creators must do whatever they can in order to stand out against what is now an ocean of competition, often resorting to dramatising, exaggerating, or even blatantly lying in their titles and content to make their work more eye-catching. This works well, given that another reason misinformation can be so difficult to manage is because it is just as deeply embedded in human nature to *fall* for catchy headlines and dramatisation as it is to create them.

We see misinformation a lot in social media, arguably the general publics' biggest source of information. In many ways, social media is an incredibly useful way for people from all over the world to keep updated on topics such as news and politics and let them find like-minded individuals to socialise with. Making such valuable content free and publicly available means that themes such as

class or wealth, which held great power over information in antiquity, have little to no authority in general exposure to information. This, however, can cause as many issues as it does benefits. With such freedom to say and post whatever the individual would like (provided it is within the appropriate guidelines of the platform) and having no obligation to present themselves as a trusted provider of information, it can be very difficult to decipher whether what someone is saying in their post in authentic or biased. This is where the freedom to question the authenticity of what we see online ought to be executed, though many don't.

There is also the fact that we are, in many ways, just as obsessed with the body beautiful as the ancients were. Social media frequently exposes users to edited photographs of the supposed 'ideal' body types, misrepresenting the person behind the screen and promoting false ideas of health. Can we really say with confidence that this is less prominent and influential on modern society than it was in the past?

What *is* different now is that we are faced with an abundance of information of various formats and degrees of authenticity, so much so that we frequently act upon the temptation to censor certain types of content in order to only be shown that which we already believe in (*Anderson, J & Rainie, L, 2017*). In doing this, we self-inflict the limitations to information that many of the ancients were subjected to. This behaviour implies that people are more receptive to potential misinformation that provides comfort rather than the confrontational truth. Now it is a question of what is to be done about this.

Is there truly an answer to this? The issue is that we spend an awful lot of time and resources on improving technology to combat suspicious behaviour and not enough on preparing people to recognise it themselves. This is not to say that technology is underserving of the attention it gets, especially given how well it alleviates the workload of manual data checking, but what we have to remember is that the infodemic is created by *people*, not technology, and as such we ought to take more care in educating the public on the consequences of both creating and believing misinformation. Much like learning a language, these things are best taught from a young age. Given the increase in which children use technology for both learning and leisure, this point only becomes more vital, as children are now more exposed to information that they are unequipped to decipher.

Over the last few years, there has been a surge in educational establishments around the world requiring students to use technological devices to complete their homework, the apps for such having been restricted to 'child-friendly' usage in order to protect children from potentially damaging information. While this is incredibly helpful in keeping children's productivity with homework running smoothly, it also begs the question of whether or not children should be educated on the dangers of lies on the internet *before* increased reliability on technology is introduced. After all, relying on protective features on apps is momentary and restricts children from depending on their own abilities to protect themselves. Technology is a very powerful, ever advancing tool. Perhaps the conveniences it offers us makes us forget that we have a responsibility to be equally as powerful and to advance in order to maintain autonomy in the face of misinformation and not have to rely solely on technological protective features.

The problem is, people are inherently gullible, and as previously stated we are attracted to information that comforts us to the point where we care very little to cross-check or verify its validity. As such, when we are confronted with information that threatens that comfort, even if it is simply a conflicting opinion someone posted on social media, we become defensive and, in doing so, put trust that there

is truth in what we are reading even if there is no practical reason. Mona Sue Weissmark, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at Harvard University, encourages people to remain in doubt of what other people deem to be true and to act scientifically in response (*The Harvard Gazette, 2020*). As useful a habit this may be, it is not at the forefront of people's minds as they absent-mindedly browse social media or websites.

Because of this, sometimes people need to be reminded to think more carefully about the information they see online. Accuracy prompts can come in many forms, all of which seeking to remind people of their responsibility to think critically about the information they see. An increasingly popular method of this is to include reminders in the individual posts that the content within may not be accurate or that it has not been confirmed by those with authority to do so. This type of immediate communication with viewers does not discriminate on whose posts it is, meaning that even potential misinformation provided by politicians can be exposed for being invalid in real time. Not only does this immediately remind people to not take the content they are viewing at face value, but also puts into perspective how many places misinformation can be found in, including those in which we tend to put more trust.

All this considered, there remains a divide between people who believe we will one day overcome the threats posed by misinformation, and those who do not, largely because of the inability to simply reject our human nature for the sake of security. What cannot be disputed, though, is that the journey of misinformation management over thousands of years has ultimately left us with the self-awareness of our own vulnerability to take the preventative measures necessary to protect ourselves as best we can from lies. Though this journey is not over, we can sit and reflect on the progress made from the ancient world of classist educational systems, wealth barriers, and dismissive attitudes towards who and what was important enough to be recorded. That being said, our shared humanity and vulnerability with the ancients must also serve as a reminder for our responsibility to maintain autonomy in the face of misinformation and to work in conjunction with the technological tools that the ancients were without in order to combat it.

Sources:

Anderson, J, Rainie L 2017, *The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online*, Pew Research Centre, p2 https://eloncdn.blob.core.windows.net/eu3/sites/964/2019/07/Future_of_Info_Environment_Elon_University_Pew_10-18-17.pdf

Livy 1960, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin Group, London, UK p29

Mona Sue Weissmark 2020, '*Advice to students: Learn to think scientifically*,' The Harvard Gazette, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/embrace-logic-to-improve-both-education-and-society/

Thucydides 2020, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley. Livius, 2.51.5-6 https://www.livius.org/sources/content/thucydides-historian/the-plague/