

Disinformation, Misinformation, and Eurosplaining



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On Nov 14, 2020

Last week, Eritrea's Ministry of Information released a statement, "Le Monde: Irresponsible Accusations against Eritrea," in which it strongly denounced the claims made in a report by Le Monde, a French outlet, that Eritrea had instigated or was somehow otherwise involved in the recent events that have been unfolding in our region. To discerning readers and observers, this case may be included in the long list of instances of disinformation and misinformation peddled about Eritrea that have taken place over the years.

To clarify, although often used interchangeably, disinformation and misinformation are actually quite different. The main thing differentiating them is intent. While misinformation is false or inaccurate information and news that are spread, regardless of intent to mislead, disinformation is spreading false or inaccurate information and news with the explicit intent of misleading. Despite this difference, both are problematic. Beyond muddying the waters and making it difficult to distinguish between what is "real" and "fake", disinformation and

misinformation undermine public and social trust, can contribute to fear, panic, and confusion, can negatively influence the socio-political landscape, and often serve to inflame or exacerbate harmful divisions in society. They also can be very dangerous, even fatal. For instance, earlier this year, a joint statement by the WHO, the UN, UNICEF, the UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, the ITU, UN Global Pulse, and the IFRC noted how misinformation and disinformation were undermining the global response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and jeopardizing measures to control the pandemic. In particular, the joint statement explained that, “Mis- and disinformation can be harmful to people’s physical and mental health; increase stigmatization; threaten precious health gains; and lead to poor observance of public health measures, thus reducing their effectiveness and endangering countries’ ability to stop the pandemic.

Misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.

Furthermore, disinformation is polarizing public debate on topics related to COVID-19; amplifying hate speech; heightening the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations; and threatening long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights and social cohesion.”

Notably, there are several different ways that people can protect themselves from disinformation and misinformation. When teaching a certain topic to students, I try to provide an array of sources so that they have a well-rounded, comprehensive, and balanced view. Around the world, it is a common practice that after seeing a health specialist in regard to some ailment, people will then get a second (or a third and even fourth) opinion. Similarly, in the world of news and

social media, one may follow and get information from a diversity of sources. Simply relying upon a small number of like-minded sources limits the range of material available to people and increases the likelihood that of falling victim to disinformation and misinformation.

Second, we all remember the adage taught to us as children that “all that glitters is not gold”, encouraging us to remain cautious and skeptical. Likewise, people should practice skepticism and be aware of the fact that not all things they may see, hear, read, or come across are true. By remaining critical and skeptical, cross-checking sources, keeping their proverbial “guard up”, and understanding that not everything they come across will be true or accurate, people can avoid being misled or fooled by false reports or exaggerated claims.

Another important step that can be taken is that people, especially youth and adolescents, can be offered lessons in digital and media literacy, helping them to learn about how to cross-check sources, judge or evaluate news and information sites, and protect themselves from inaccurate or harmful information.

In addition to disinformation and misinformation, another problem that has remained constant over the years in reporting, commentary, and analyses of Eritrea is Eurosplaining. Many E r i t r e a n s , including this a u t h o r h a v e b e e n on the receiving end of patronizing attempts, sometimes subtle and at other times more egregious, by some non-Eritreans and others not from the region to interpret our experiences, describe our reality, and explain things to us that we already know, solely based on the assumption that they somehow or inherently must know more.

Of course, debate is often good and disagreements are possible. Many different people can and should contribute to the general dialogue and conversation. It is also certainly true that more information and opinions can be positive and very useful. An important part of learning, after all, is about sharing and exchange, and we all can grow or improve. However, there are several problems and particularly grating aspects about the Eurosplaining (and “-splaining” in general).

For one, most of the explanations are deeply misinformed, greatly misguided, or

otherwise simply wrong. Second, the various instances of Eurosplaining are for the most part on topics that those of us being explained to have direct lived experience or expertise, or are generally already well-acquainted with. Furthermore, although not always rude and deliberate, Eurosplaining is often unsolicited and delivered in a condescending manner and tone. It sees many of us constantly: being interrupted, cut off, and shut down; spoken above, over, or at; and disqualified, dismissed, or willfully ignored. Look closely and it should not take too long to see that Eurosplaining actually has its roots in the problematic mentality, which may be traced back centuries and that helped to legitimize colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, that Africans are inherently less intelligent and less capable. Thus, suggesting that we are basically ignorant, incompetent, and incapable of sharing or contributing important information or knowledge, the Eurosplainers often pat us on the head while presumptuously telling us, “Be quiet, I simply know much better because of who I am.”

Finally, some humble suggestions. For those on the receiving end of the Eurosplaining: Do not be discouraged or daunted. Instead, continue to share your voice and perspectives. For those doing the Eurosplaining: Pause. Think about the dynamics the power differentials that may be at hand. Consider whether your explanations are needed, really about being helpful, or even desired. Ask more questions and allow others to share their views or express themselves.

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