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What is Disnormative Information?

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Abstract. This article examines the nature of the concepts of disnormative information and normative information.

Information can also be viewed in relation to its accuracy, values, norms and attitudes prevailing in society. Not all our actions comply with the norms and values accepted by the society and some of the information can be against our values and norms or even against the legislation. This information is here defined as the disnormative information. Disnormative information is the opposite of normative information which is supporting the values, norms and legislation of our society given by authorities, scientists etc. Disnormative information is often distributed via internet and especially in discussion forums and other social media services. It promotes counterculture, it is based on experience, opinions and pseudoscience, not scientific results, and it does not support the generally accepted conventions of our society.

Keywords: disnormative information; information; knowledge; information seeking

Introduction

In the philosophy of science, there are many different definitions for information and several philosophers have analyzed its essence. On the other hand, the relationship of truth and normativity has not been discussed a lot among those definitions.

The purpose of this article is to present and analyze closer two concepts, disnormative information and normative information which were first introduced by Ari Haasio (2015a) in his dissertation. Those concepts have been used in some studies (e.g. Ruokolainen 2018; Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019a; Ruokolainen and Widen 2019). In addition, a new concept, disnormative knowledge, which is based on the idea of disnormative information, is introduced

in this article. The empirical findings are based on previous studies (Haasio 2015; Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019) and the theoretical framework introduced in this article is made by Haasio (2015a; 2015b). In his dissertation, Haasio (2015) analyzed 7610 messages from Finnish discussion group for socially withdrawn youth (aka. hikikomori). The concept of disnormative information was also one of the theoretical premises of a study conducted in Tor-networks illegal drug market, Sipulitori, by Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen (2019a).

Especially when studying information needs and information sharing which is associated with illegal activities or morally questionable issues, the concept of disnormative information is useful. It describes the essence of information wanted and explains motives and problems in information seeking process. For example, Grimani, Gavine and Moncur (2020) speak about disnormative space that enables illegal activities. In our view, disnormative information is typical for these spaces, e.g. Tor-network or other forums where illegal actions take place (see also Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019a).

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of the concept of disnormative information is based on the Reijo Savolainen's (1995) model of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS). His model points out that values and norms affect to the information seeking process. Savolainen does not analyze the nature of information even though he points out the importance of values and attitudes as influential factors to the information seeking process. Society's prevalent norms support the idea how we should act, and what kind of behavior is against the approved norms in social situations (Bicchieri, Muldoon and Sontuoso 2018). The acts against the norms can be called disnormative and the acts supported by the society, normative.

There are several definitions of information among the information studies. One of the best known is Shannon and Weaver's (1949/1963) model and definition based on the concept of entropy. The greater the entropy is, the higher the level of uncertainty is. Johnson (1996) has pointed out that the more familiar the situation is, the less information it generates. So according to Shannon and Weaver's model information is always representing something new. Johnson (1996) understands information in more general sense, that is, information is the "discernment of patterns in world around us".

The value chain of information is one way to demonstrate how we can understand the concept of information. Information becomes knowledge through interpretation.

Each recipient gives meaning to the information and this meaningful entity formed by the recipient of the information can be called knowledge (T.D. Wilson 1984, P. Wilson 1977).

From the perspective of information science, knowledge is the interpretation of semantic or pragmatic information about an individual's subject or expertise. Interpretation is influenced by, among other things, a person's prior knowledge, worldview, prejudices and attitudes, as well as many other individual and societal factors. (Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019b.) The concept of information is understood here widely. Like Brenda Dervin (1983) has pointed out, information consists not only of facts but also, for example, guesses opinions and fiction. This implicates the fact that information is not always true or accurate.

Nowadays especially the concept of misinformation is used when speaking about inaccurate or false information. Karlova and Fisher (2003) point out that misinformation and disinformation are subspecies of information. Misinformation can be defined as false or misleading information that can be faulty, defective, unclear, ambiguous, or imprecise. It is not necessarily false; however, it can be unclear or ambiguous and therefore misleading. Disinformation on the other hand is false and deceitful information that is deliberately distributed. It is always malicious and intentionally spread. (Karlova and Fisher 2013.) The concepts of misinformation and disinformation should not be mixed up with the concept of disnormative information, because the latter does not take a stand to the accuracy or truthfulness of the information.

Disnormative and normative information

The nature of information can also be viewed in relation to its accuracy, values, norms and attitudes prevailing in society. Not all our actions comply with the norms and values accepted by the society. Similarly, not all of our information needs and the information we gather comply with society's norms and values.

Disnormative information is not always inaccurate, nor is normative information is accurate. Misinformation and disinformation are concepts which handle the accuracy and truthfulness of information, disnormative information is based on the assumption that people have a information need for the kind of information which can be either illegal or encourage illegal activities, be morally questionable in the opinion of the majority, because it stands against majority's values.

Not all activities, however, are accepted by society's values and norms and therefore some information needs and information sought for those purposes can be what we call disnormative. It promotes countercultures and alternative value systems (e.g. alternative medicine) which can be even illegal (e.g. outlaw bikers, drug addicts). Some of the disnormative information is based on the pseudo-science, like using silver water instead of antibiotics.

Disnormative information varies and it is different in different cultures and different times. For example in Finnish society sex is not a taboo as a subject of discussion, but in Japanese society it is a very delicate matter. Haasio and Naka (2019) found out that Japanese hikikomoris do not express the information needs concerning sexual things as freely as hikikomoris in Finland. The information given about this topic was also different – in Finland, it was normative information while sexual fantasies were discussed in discussion forum, in Japan it would have been disnormative. For example, the religion can restrict the information and be one of the reasons why in another culture some types of information is disnormative while it is normative in another culture. Also in different eras, different subjects can be either normative or disnormative depending on the era's moral code.

	NORMATIVE INFORMATION	DISNORMATIVE INFORMATION
Typical features	Institutionalized Public Complies with the norms and value system of society Based on law, research, generally accepted conventions Conforms to public opinion and consensus Formal	Against public opinion Promotes counterculture Promotes alternative value systems Based on experience, opinions, unaccepted research or pseudo-science Acts as counterforce for consensus "Revolutionary" Informal
Distributors	Officials and authorities Educational institutions The state Municipalities Research institutions The defence force, military institutions	Individuals Different political, religious movements Communities that share the same alternative norms and value system Subcultures and their representatives
Sources	Officials' and authorities' publications Television Books Magazines Specialist sources, such as doctors, etc. Web sources administered by institutions or authorities	Alternative publications Internet communities such as discussion forums & groups Websites whose administrators promote non-consensual norms and views Alternative literature and magazines

Table 1. Typical features, distributors and sources of disnormative information compared to the normative information. Source: Haasio 2015a. Translation from Finnish by the author.

A good example given in the past research (Haasio 2015a; Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019) about the disnormative information is the information concerning drug abuse and marketing the illegal drugs. As an example (Haasio 2015a, 2015b) of disnormative information need and the answer, a good example is:

Q: I'd just like to expand my consciousness. What drugs do you recommend?

A: Ketamine, MXE or DXM. Doissosiative don't make you as anxious as psychedelics or when smoking weed.

Although the example of information need concerning drug abuse is representing illegal activities according to the Finnish law, not all the disnormative information is always illegal. According to Haasio (2015a, 2015b) there are two types of disnormative information: 1) information which is needed to do something against the law and 2) information which is morally questionable by the majority of people, but it is not illegal. An example of the latter kind of disnormative information could be the information wanted about different kinds of sexual fetishes.

In previous studies (Haasio 2015a; Haasio 2015b; Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019a) the role of peer-information has been significant when people have sought disnormative information. Trust and other person's experience together with shared values are important (Haasio 2015a) when seeking disnormative information. When seeking information about illegal drugs, these factors seemed to be in an important role (Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019a).

Elferda Chatman (1991, 1992, 1996, 1999) has underlined that those people sharing the similar kind of a "small world" share similar kind of values and do also trust the information they get from the others sharing the physical environment. The same fact seems to be true in the virtual world (Haasio 2015a; Haasio, Harviainen and Savolainen 2019a). Peer information is widely found trustable when people seek disnormative information. This is, because the information needed is often based on the experience informants have about a similar situation or question.

The concept of normative information on the other hand represents the kind of information, which is accepted and often produced by the authorities, governments, scientists and other respected distributors and sources (see table 1). It is the kind of information, which is widely accepted in the society. For example the information about the dangers of drug misuse given by the doctors is normative information, and the information distributed in the discussion forums about the usage of drugs and how to dosage and buy them, is disnormative by nature.

Disnormative information is not a new phenomenon. It has existed always, but its conceptualization has not been done in a previous studies even though some information seeking about drugs (e.g. Todd 1999) and suicides (Recupero, Harms and Noble 2008) have been studied. Nowadays most of the disnormative information is distributed via Internet, but before the digital age leaflets and other alternative publications were used to disseminate it.

The value chain of information is based on the idea that information turns into knowledge by one's cognitive process. When considering the information seeking process of the disnormative information, similar phases can be recognized as seeking normative information. Information needs are expressed in certain forums (e.g. when needing information about drug abuse, Tor-network or sites supporting drug abuse are used). One can say that the environment where the needs of disnormative information are expressed vary when comparing to the needs of normative information. In both cases information turns into knowledge similar ways: by interpreting the received information in a cognitive process. And after the cognitive interpretation disnormative information becomes disnormative knowledge, which can be used to achieve those goals which are morally or legally unacceptable in our society.

Conclusion

The concept of disnormative information needs to be examined more closely in empirical studies. On the other hand the reasons and situations of the needs of disnormative information are interesting. In which situations it is sought and when it is needed? Normative information's truthfulness and accuracy can be verified e.g. by science or authorities, but which mechanisms there are to verify disnormative information's accuracy?

As a concept disnormative information is a tool, which helps us to analyze the content of information needed. As well as triggers why information is sought, also the types of information people want, is an interesting point of view in the future.

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