

# The real computer virus



Hazards of Misinformation First Last Dr. TeacherFirst TeacherLast Number 9  
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Cannon covered in detail the much-ignored ubiquitous nature of disinformation in his article (2001) in the backdrop of new fast paced communication technologies such as the Internet and email. He illustrated his observations using several instances of belief in and spread of unverified information with effects ranging from the very benign to the ridiculous to, sometimes, very dangerous.

He cited several examples such as the imagined fate of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence and the glorification of Vicente Fox, a Mexican politician, by propagation of myths of education in Harvard and position in Coca Cola Company associated with him. It is, however, examples with dangerous consequences that give a chilling shock to readers and forces them to take notice of effects of disinformation.

Careless use of unsubstantiated information can have dangerous and lingering effects on social groups. Cannon recalled that in a “ PrimeTime Live” show hosted by Dianne Sawyer, she claimed a “ government statistic” indicated that gay teenagers were thrice as likely to commit suicide than others. Though she later shunned responsibility by attributing this information to Ellen Degeneres, the guest on the show, the effects were long lasting.

Investigation revealed that this assertion about gay teenagers was not a statistic but just an opinion of a social worker in San Francisco. In fact, real studies by professional organizations like the CDC had concluded that there was no evidence to back this claim. Still, the myth of gay teenagers being amenable to suicide crept into the Internet domain and newspapers of

repute such as New York Times, Chicago Tribune and others. Television networks picked it up and propagated it further.

Gay rights activists too, including a Governor of Massachusetts, used it to gain public relation victories. In reality, however, this compartmentalized the gay community further and labelled them as suicide prone. Other than unsubstantiated labelling of a social community, this disinformation also could become a false refuge for gay teenagers who struggle for their identity.

In yet another example, a major health disaster loomed over South Africa as a result of believing an already discredited piece of information on the Internet. President Thabo Mbeki, refused discounts for South Africa on life-saving drugs for AIDS simply because he believed they were not the cure. His source of this information, or rather disinformation, was a website.

With many theories surrounding the disease of AIDS, the question of whether HIV causes it or not has been thoroughly researched. Theories which claim that HIV does not cause AIDS have been rejected each time by the scientific community.

However, believing in this disinformation, Mbeki made it difficult for millions of South African sufferers of AIDS to get the drug AZT for HIV. In fact, he even took away support for various programs to control HIV.

The problem wasn't simply limited to a single website or a single powerful individual who caused it. In a recursive fashion, by propagation of news, Mbeki's actions found way into the mainstream media and confused many sufferers of AIDS.

## References

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