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Misinformation Has a Patron: the Ego That Calls Itself Post-Truth

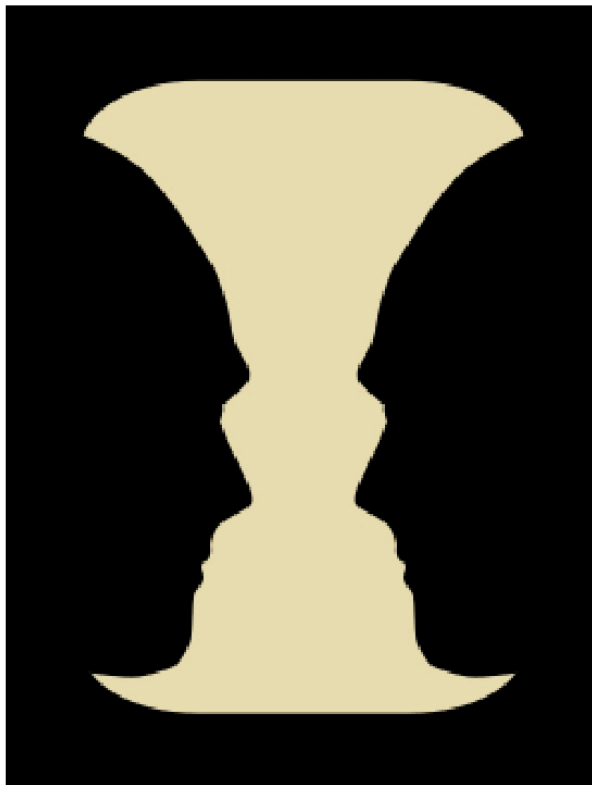
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By Acharya Prashant



Serious institutions in the world now seem engaged in fighting misinformation. Governments are regulating, platforms are fact-checking, academics are mapping how false content spreads, and journalists are building verification desks with a rigour they have not applied to anything in years. The World Economic Forum, in its Global Risks Report 2026, has ranked misinformation and disinformation as the top risk facing humanity over the next two years, above armed conflict. If the global mobilisation is real, the alarm is

genuine, and the concern is not manufactured. The question at the foundation of the entire enterprise, however, has not been asked. And it is a question prior to every debate about content, platforms, and public policy.

The fundamental question is not about platforms or algorithms or the velocity of false content. Those would come later. The fundamental question to ask, before talking of misinformation, should be: what is information? Information, at its most basic, is that which informs, that which moves a person from not-knowing toward knowing, toward a more accurate picture of what is. It is not merely data. It is data received by someone, processed by someone, used by someone. Which means that before we can speak about misinformation, we must speak about the instrument through which information is received and processed. We must speak about the mind. And because there is no information except information-for-someone, we must also ask: for whom is this information appearing as information at all? The mind, in its innocent biological state, is a neutral instrument: memory and intellect, a recording machine and a processing machine, neither desiring nor fearing nor choosing. Those operations belong to the ego, the felt sense of "I am this," this identity, this tribe, this ideology, this wound, which commandeers the mind's machinery and directs it not toward what is true but toward what is safe. And what is safe for the ego is not accurate information. It is confirming information, information that strengthens the positions already held, reinforces the identities already inhabited, and supplies ammunition for the stories already being told about who the enemies are and why they must be opposed.

The condition has a precise shape: not ignorance in the sense of knowing nothing, but fragmented knowing, the accumulation of vast information about the world while remaining structurally unaware of the one doing the knowing. The known grows without limit; the knower is never examined. The question you ask always reveals more about you than about the subject you are asking about. You never seek to know everything; you seek to know something specific, chosen from an infinite field of possible subjects, and that choice is driven by an inner hunger, a fear, a loyalty not yet examined. The information sought is downstream of the identity being protected. This is the ego's operation. The information age has simply scaled it: humanity has never accumulated more knowledge about the world, nor remained more thoroughly ignorant of the one accumulating it. We call this an information crisis. At root, it is a crisis of the informer.

Who Decides What Is False?

Now, the question the entire world can be asked with its full weight.

If the ego is always filtering information through what it has already decided to protect, then what does misinformation actually mean? The standard definition runs as follows: misinformation is false or inaccurate information, regardless of intent; disinformation is false information spread deliberately. Both definitions assume a stable, agreed-upon baseline of truth against which the falseness of a given claim can be measured. They assume, in other words, a shared epistemic ground, a common reference point that both the person spreading the claim and the person correcting it can appeal to. They also assume a judge sufficiently outside the field to certify what counts as true in the first place.

This is the assumption that has not been examined. And it is precisely the assumption that the condition we are living through has already dissolved. The conflict now is not only over facts; it is over the authority to name them as facts.

The world that gave birth to the misinformation crisis is the same world that named itself post-truth. That naming was not accidental. Post-truth names a real condition: the condition in which facts no longer settle disputes, in which evidence no longer commands consensus across communities, in which two groups can look at the same event and inhabit incommensurable versions of what occurred, each version internally coherent, each supported by its own sources and experts, and neither capable of producing a fact that the other is compelled to accept as decisive. The Reuters Institute's 2025 survey, cited in the same WEF report, captures the paradox precisely: 58 per cent of news consumers globally are concerned about distinguishing truth from falsehood online, while in India, where WhatsApp is identified by 53 per cent of respondents as the primary channel for false and misleading information, news consumption on that same platform continues to grow. This paradox is not a mystery; it is a demonstration. The ego that is aware of the problem and continues feeding the appetite anyway is not irrational. It is operating exactly as the ego does: the awareness exists at one level, the hunger operates at another, and the hunger is the stronger force. Knowing something is confirming content does not reduce the need for confirmation. It may even intensify it.

But here is the problem that this creates, and it is a problem so fundamental that it calls the entire enterprise into question. Misinformation, as a category, requires the existence of a shared truth baseline. Misinformation is false relative to something true. If there is no agreed-upon truth, if the shared ground has dissolved, then calling something misinformation is not a description of a fact about the content. It is an assertion of a contested position, one party claiming that their version of _____ one and the opposing version,

therefore, illegitimate. In a post-truth world, the label 'misinformation' is itself an act of power, not an act of description.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, official bodies across the world flagged claims about the virus's origins, the efficacy of various interventions, and the appropriate policy response as misinformation, removing them from platforms and discrediting those who raised them. Several of those claims were quietly acknowledged as plausible, or reinstated as legitimate subjects of inquiry, by the same institutions within two to three years. The scientists who had been labelled spreaders of misinformation had not changed their position. The institutions that had labelled them had shifted theirs. What the category 'misinformation' had tracked, it turned out, was not the truth. It had tracked the institutional consensus of the moment, which is a different thing entirely. What moved was not necessarily the fact under dispute, but the boundary of what institutions were willing to call sayable. This is not an isolated episode. It is the structure of every significant information dispute of our time, from contested electoral claims to the framing of every active conflict to the empirical status of policies on which expert bodies genuinely disagree. The WEF report's own data reflects this without quite naming it: in the same rankings, misinformation and censorship-and-surveillance risks move together, feed each other, sit in direct adjacency. They are not two separate problems. They are the same problem viewed from opposite sides of the same power arrangement. The one who controls the definition of misinformation controls what can be said, which is why every government in the world is currently fighting to be the one holding that definition.

The Closed Circuit

The misinformation debate has focused almost entirely on the consumer: the person who receives, believes, and spreads false content. It has treated the producer of false content as a separate and distinct problem, as one of malice or manipulation. This separation does not survive scrutiny. The ego that manufactures misinformation and the ego that consumes it are in a closed circuit. They are not two independent actors accidentally meeting in the market; they are two functions of the same structure. The producer does not invent freely; it creates what the consumer structurally requires. Profitability in the attention economy is a function of need-satisfaction, and the need being satisfied is always the ego's need for confirmation, for threat-framing, for tribal reinforcement. The producer's ego, whether operating for financial gain, political advantage, or the tribal currency of belonging, has identified and is servicing the consumer's ego. Both operations are driven by the same structural condition. The supply of false content is not independent of the demand generated by it, shaped by it, and refined in real time through the management metrics. To address the

supply without addressing the demand is to cut a weed at its stem while leaving the root untouched. Lies do not spread. They are summoned.

The piece of the diagnosis that is most consistently missing in discussions of the misinformation crisis is a historical one. Modernity has systematically dismantled the structures through which the ego previously borrowed its confirming identity passively and continuously. Religion offered the ego its meaning, its cosmology, its place in an ordered hierarchy of beings. This is in itself an ego-construction, but one that performed a specific psychological function: it supplied the ego's need for confirmation automatically, without requiring active seeking. Caste and kinship prescribed roles, loyalties, enemies. Nation provided the grandest confirming mirror of all. These structures were not good in themselves; they produced immense suffering. But as they thin, fragment, or lose their authority, the ego does not lose the need they served. It becomes more desperate for its satisfaction, and now must seek actively and continuously what it once received through inheritance, choosing, each time, to enter an information environment built precisely around that seeking, rather than turning toward the discomfort of self-examination that the same absence could have prompted. The old scaffolding weakened; the appetite did not. It simply entered the marketplace and began scrolling. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2025 found that only 36 per cent of people globally believe things will be better for the next generation, with the figure falling to 17 per cent in the United Kingdom and 29 per cent in the United States: a civilisational loss of faith in the structures that once supplied the ego's confirming identity by default. The misinformation crisis is not merely the ego's selective hunger scaled by technology. It is that hunger intensified by the collapse of the traditional scaffolding that previously managed its appetite at a lower temperature. The post-truth era is not a new phenomenon. The ego has always been post-truth. It simply has better tools now.

The Only Question That Reaches the Root

The proposed solutions follow inevitably from the diagnosis, and the diagnosis, as we have seen, is wrong. If the problem is external, a problem of content rather than of the instrument receiving it, then the solutions will be external: better algorithms, more rigorous content authentication, expanded digital literacy, platform governance frameworks, multi-stakeholder oversight bodies, etc. The WEF report, having documented the scale of the crisis with admirable thoroughness, recommends precisely these interventions. They are not useless; they address real symptoms of a real problem. But what they cannot address is the condition generating the demand for false information because that condition is not a property of the content. It is something else, something deeper, something that cannot be fixed by summing it. The debate remains

horizontal, at the level of systems and signals, while the crisis is being generated vertically, at the level of the self.

A correction reaches the person who already believes a false claim and, in the most optimistic scenario, updates that specific belief while leaving the underlying structure that generated the belief entirely intact. Improve the algorithm and the ego finds a new channel; authenticate the content and it learns to trust only sources not yet discredited; train the media consumer in critical thinking and she applies it selectively, with increased rigour toward claims she already disbelieves and unchanged credulity toward those she already holds. A study published in *Science* tracking 126,000 stories shared by three million people over a decade found that false rumours were approximately 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted than accurate ones, and that false news reached an audience of 1,500 people nearly six times faster. The primary agents of this spread were not bots but human beings, choosing to share what confirmed what they already believed. Not machines malfunctioning, but selves selecting. Research on debunking adds a further finding the misinformation industry does not advertise: corrections frequently fail to reduce the original false belief, and in conditions where the claim is closely tied to the consumer's identity, they have been associated with deeper entrenchment rather than revision. The correction does not merely underperform. Under the conditions in which the ego is most invested, it can actively deepen what it was designed to dissolve.

The fact-checker herself is not exempt, and this must be said with more precision than the misinformation debate customarily allows. She too has decided that certain claims are true and others false, and her investment in those decisions is not purely epistemic. She enters the field not as a disembodied truth-function, but as a self located in institutions, incentives, and prior commitments. She operates within institutions that have editorial positions, audience relationships, funding structures, and incentive alignments that shape what counts as the settled baseline. But there is a structural problem more fundamental than bias. The fact-checking industry requires the problem to remain a problem of content, because if the crisis is located instead in the structure of the self, no institutional response is adequate and the institutions become redundant. Their legitimacy, their funding, and their public function depend on the misinformation crisis being understood as a supply-and-distribution problem, one that external intervention can progressively solve. To acknowledge that the root is in the ego would be to acknowledge that the only solution is one that cannot be institutionalised, scaled, or measured. Institutional survival does not permit this acknowledgement, not from malice but from the same self-interest that drives the consumer. The correction apparatus is not above the crisis it is meant to solve. It is a product of the same

condition, operating with greater institutional legitimacy and a correspondingly more confident conviction in its own neutrality. This is exactly what the unexamined self looks like at its most refined.

What the algorithm did was remove the friction that previously slowed the ego's tendency down and build an economy around accelerating it, and what anonymity did was remove the social mirror that previously, however imperfectly, reflected back to the ego what it was doing: the face that others could see, the name they could hold accountable, the moment of recognition that might have given the ego pause. It is the condition of the self that knows only the world rendered visible at civilisational scale, and being consistently mistaken, by almost everyone engaged in addressing it, for a problem of content.

There is another kind of knowing, one that includes both the seen and the seer simultaneously, not only what happened but who was witnessing it and through what filters, not only the information but the one selecting it and why. The misinformation debate is conducted entirely in the register of the first kind. It asks only about the content: is this claim accurate? It never asks about the one consuming the content: who is this person, what do they need this claim to be, what inner vacancy does it fill, what identity does it protect? It asks what was said. It does not ask what in the hearer required it to be said that way. That second set of questions is the territory of honest self-examination, and the misinformation industry has no entry point into it, because entering it would require acknowledging that the reader is not the victim of the crisis but its primary author.

Every piece of misinformation that has ever spread at scale has done so because enough people needed it to be true. The ego does not merely prefer the confirming story. It requires it, the way a structure requires its supporting wall, not from malice but from the structural condition of being a self that has no stable ground of its own and must therefore borrow it continuously from fixed positions and confirmed identities. And unlike ordinary hunger it has no sufficiency point: each confirmation consumed does not reduce the appetite but recalibrates it upward, so that the next piece of confirming content must be slightly more extreme, more certain, more tribal than the last to produce the same effect. Remove the story and the self built around it faces the discomfort of groundlessness, the discomfort of having been wrong about something that mattered, of inhabiting a world that does not confirm one's righteousness. For an ego that has organised its identity around a particular version of events, the correction is experienced not as an update but as an attack. What is under threat is not merely a claim, but the architect's claim. It responds accordingly, and no correction, however scientific, can find a way around that response,

because the response is not produced by the quality of the information. It is produced by the structure of the self receiving it.

The post-truth world will not be mended from outside. The shared ground does not return through better content moderation or more comprehensive fact-checking portals. It returns, if it returns, one person at a time, when the person asking how to identify misinformation becomes willing to ask instead: what is my own relationship to what is true?

The asking is not an intellectual exercise. It begins, in practice, at the level of sensation: when a claim arrives that disturbs a settled position, the first response is not reasoning but resistance. Something tightens before thinking begins. That tightening is the first honest fact in the encounter. That tightening is the ego identifying threat: not to the person but to the story the person has become. The move that genuine self-examination makes is not to override this resistance with superior logic, because logic is itself subject to the same ego that produced the resistance. The move is to turn toward the resistance, to stay with it long enough to ask what is being protected and why it requires this particular claim to be true. What identity would be disturbed if this claim were accurate? What would have to be relinquished? That inquiry — not more balanced information consumption, not diversified media diet, not fact-checking habits — is what self-examination actually means. It is not comfortable, and it cannot begin unless the ego makes the sovereign choice to look rather than defend, because the instrument being asked to do the examining is the same instrument that has been selecting the confirming content. It has a vested interest in the verdict.

This is not a skill that can be imparted from outside. It is the movement from the knowledge that knows only the world to the knowledge that includes the knower. That movement is uncomfortable in the way genuine self-examination has always been uncomfortable, because what it finds when it looks honestly is not a dispassionate truth-seeker accidentally misled by a clever algorithm. It finds an ego that was not misled at all, that selected exactly what it needed and called the selection knowledge.

One clarification must be made, and it is important enough to make directly. This movement restores the individual's honest relationship to reality, but does not guarantee agreement between individuals. Two persons who have genuinely seen their own selection mechanisms may still reach different conclusions about a contested event, because the event itself may be genuinely ambiguous, and because the thinning of the ego does not eliminate all limitation of perspective. What changes between them is not the conclusion but the quality of the engagement. Ego-fortified disagreement is a defensive posture; each party defends not a position but a self, and the cost of disagreement is the dissolution of the self. Ego-thin disagreement

is a genuine inquiry with two participants: each position is held lightly enough that evidence can actually reach it, and the one who changes their mind does not experience it as defeat. A shared reality may not return. The pretence that institutional consensus equals truth will certainly not return, and should not. But the shared ground for honest truth-seeking can return, and that is a different and more valuable thing.

That finding does not resolve the information crisis. It does not restore consensus or silence a single deepfake. What it does is something quieter and more consequential: it changes the person making the next choice. The ego that has genuinely seen its own selection does not become wiser or more balanced; it becomes less desperate for the next confirmation. And in a crisis whose engine is not the lie but the ego that needed the lie, that change is the only one that has ever reached the root. The question the world is asking, that is how to identify misinformation, is the right question. It has simply been directed at the wrong person. The claim in front of us may or may not be false. The certainty receiving it is almost never innocent.

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