An obsession with gauging accuracy of individual posts is misguided. To strengthen information ecosystems, focus on narratives and why people share what they do.

In the fall of 2017, Collins Dictionary named fake news word of the year. It was hard to argue with the decision. Journalists were using the phrase to raise awareness of false and misleading information online. Academics had started publishing copiously on the subject and even named conferences after it. And of course, US president Donald Trump regularly used the epithet from the podium to discredit nearly anything he disliked.

By spring of that year, I had already become exasperated by how this term was being used to attack the news media. Worse, it had never captured the problem: most content wasn’t actually fake, but genuine content used out of context—and only rarely did it look like news. I made a rallying cry to stop using fake news and instead use misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation under the umbrella term information disorder. These terms, especially the first two, have caught on, but they represent an overly simple, tidy framework I no longer find useful.

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