

Investigating the Rulings on 'Misinformation' in Canada's
Legislative Assemblies

REPORT 1

**Terms of Reference for a
Survey of Speakers about
'Misinformation' Rulings in
Canada's Legislative Assemblies**

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Ottawa, Canada

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A. Introduction to the Pilot Study, Investigating the Rulings on 'Misinformation' in Canada's Legislative Assemblies

The context for this pilot study, *Investigating the Rulings on 'Misinformation' in Canadian Legislative Assemblies*, is provided by the report, [The Inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information.](#)

It is emphasized at the outset that the present pilot study topic was not included in the research design of The Inescapable Truth project, and there were no plans for any further studies this soon after the publishing The Inescapable Truth report in September 2020.

That is, because of the relatively limited amount of substantive research exploring any deemed connection information and *misinformation*, the planned schedule was to wait six months or more. (See Endnote 1 which explains why information is written as information, and misinformation may appear in italics as *misinformation*)

Such a pause would allow the findings of the initial report to percolate before considering a re-visit to this research domain.

Further, a pause would allow time for such tasks as assembling materials for statement of problem and research design purposes, as well as examining concerns that arise from the initial report as possible research topics.

However, in the spirit of the adage about the best laid plans of mice and men going awry, an event occurred which dramatically telescoped the timeframe that had been anticipated between the completion of the initial project and the start of the next one.

And, it significantly changed plans for investigating concerns arising from the original pilot study.

Several of those concerns are directly pertinent to this report, so they are addressed in Section B.

The event which precipitated this pilot study has two parts that require being made explicit:

First, there was use of the term 'misinformation' in a remark by a Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) during a recent session of the Ontario Legislative Assembly; and,

Second, there was the immediate ruling by Acting Speaker Percy Hatfield instructing the MPP to withdraw the term.

The phrase “out of the blue” seems especially apt in this circumstance, because it was a just-by-chance, fluky stroke of serendipity rather than premeditated intention which caused me to witness this particular exchange which was only a minute or so in duration.

As for the two parts comprising the event, details about their significance are given in Section C. For the purposes of the Introduction, it is sufficient to note that the research objectives of the initial pilot study focused on epistemological and defining issues, and did not involve inspecting bodies of literature on a case-by-case basis for empirical evidence.

However, use of the term ‘misinformation’ in the Ontario Legislative Assembly, in combination with the ruling by Acting Speaker Hatfield, signalled that it could be propitious for a pilot study investigation at this time of the rulings across Canada about the use of the term ‘misinformation’ in legislative assemblies.

Second, although the ruling in the Ontario Legislative Assembly prompted the idea of expanding the review of records to other legislative assemblies, the apparent absence of prior research in this field suggested that the Ontario experience be used to sound out an additional legislative assembly as a form of second opinion or pre-test before broadening communications to all legislative assembly Speakers.

For reasons detailed in Section D, an inquiry was made of the Hon. Anthony Rota, Member of Parliament (MP) and Speaker of the federal House of Commons.

MPs represent ridings across Canada, so there are advantages to obtaining a reading on the use of the term ‘misinformation’ by MPs during proceedings of the House, which are presided over by The Speaker or by the Deputy Speaker, Carol Hughes, MP.

As the reader may be aware, claims and counter-claims in the House of Commons often involve highly-charged language, and the past year or so has been sharply turbulent in that respect, with much more turbulence likely to come as political tempers fray due to economic, financial, social, pandemic, climate change, policing, and other pressures. Hence, it seems that it is very timely to be asking about the use of the concocted nonsense term *misinformation* during House of Commons speeches and debates.

Third, while the evidence is clear that the quantity of communications – text, image, voice, etc., – by individuals, governments, businesses, organizations, etc., is increasing at rapid rates at the local, national, and international levels due to advances in technology, and especially due to the emergence of social media, no evidence has been found to suggest that the quality of these communications is keeping pace.

One consequence of the quantity of communications apparently overwhelming the quality of communications, and a motivation for this study, is that information is put at risk by the dissemination and use of so-called *misinformation* statements and its subset, *disinformation* statements. (See Endnote 2 for an explanation as to why I do not include any references in this report to academic or other productions on the topics of *misinformation* or *disinformation*)

Finally, statements about information, *misinformation* and *disinformation* appear in what may be generally referred to as 'the literature', which is defined in Section E to be comprised of nine different bodies of literature. Research undertaken for The Inescapable Truth project revealed that *misinformation* appeared in a number of the bodies of literature.

However, there was no apparent sign that it would be better to examine one body or sub-body of literature over the others in an investigation which pursues findings presented in the report [The Inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information.](#)

That all changed, of course, with the Ontario Legislative Assembly event pointing us to the literature on rulings by Speakers of Canadian legislative assemblies.

This pilot study therefore investigates the proposition that rulings by Speakers could be critical to reducing the risk that information is overwhelmed by references to *misinformation*, and to lowering the likelihood of Canadian society collapsing into an abyss of communications babble whereby distinctions between information and *misinformation* just disappear as if vaporized in some form of alternate epistemological reality (Section E).

B. Concerns Arising from the Report, [The inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information](#)

The findings that *disinformation* and *misinformation* have nothing at all to do with information, and that statements and claims invoking those terms are engaged in concocted nonsense, are "put out there" for examination and possible counter-argument, which is part of the research process.

In addition, however, the research process can include stages wherein investigators make inquiries about such matters as shortcomings, implications of completed research, implications for future research, as well as likely or possible next or different steps.

In the case of the present body of research, there is confidence in the soundness of the methodology employed, but there was also a disconcerting but realistic sense of foreboding which I perceived upon completing the original report.

Namely, things do not look promising about the future of information in a world in which two concocted nonsense terms, *disinformation* and *misinformation*, are seemingly shown undue regard at the expense of information, which is the basis of knowledge.

Four comments summarize the essence of post-publication concerns.

First, it was demonstrated in multiple ways that information is derived from data and has been derived from data for centuries. Further, information does not exist in splendid isolation; it occupies the middle place or hinge position between data and knowledge, as in the data ➔ information ➔ knowledge transform process.

The example of geographic information is used to inject concreteness into a discussion which is long on ideology and short on methodology, and frequently lacks the empirical substance of reality that the geographic data ➔ geographic information ➔ geographic knowledge transform relationship brings to the conversation.

Long story short, information is information, period, and while there are degrees in the quality of information, it is what it is, namely a product derived from data based on one or more ways of knowing, with the only robust way of knowing being that of science using methodological design, analysis, and synthesis research techniques. (See Endnote 3 for a comment on ways of knowing)

As for *disinformation* and *misinformation*, it was demonstrated that they are not derived from data, have nothing to do with science and methodologically designed research, and make no contribution whatsoever to knowledge.

Instead, statements and claims about *disinformation* and *misinformation* are best described as fabrications and misrepresentations of dubious spawn, and are often referred to by such disparaging phrases as “pulled from thin air”, “made up to tell a story”, “the rant of a crazy man”, “complete fiction”, ‘sheer drivel’, “another baseless distraction”, “total bullshit”, ‘conman’s hustle’, falsehoods, and “liar’s truth’.

Or, very often, the terms are simply pejorative remarks which are intended to embarrass, degrade, humiliate, etc., but without presenting empirical, reality-based data to support the slur or dismissive or other type of unkind remark. The phrase “cheap shot” may come to mind.

Further in that vein, misrepresentations are misrepresentations, and lies are lies, plain and simple, and have nothing to do with information. However, personal, professional, organizational, and other vested interests try hard to connect lies and

misrepresentations with information, which leads to rebuttals using the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation*, and the quantity of concocted nonsense expands.

As a demonstrative case in point, it is widely accepted that during his term as President, Donald Trump lied more than 29,000 times, and thousands of social media items and broadcast media stories characterized those lies as *disinformation* and *misinformation*. However, they were just lies, and had and have no connection of any kind whatsoever to information. Indeed, I have not encountered any non-trivial information associated with Trump during his term in office.

And yet, and this is the matter of concern, all these manifestations of concocted nonsense, dressed up in the high-sounding terms *misinformation* and *disinformation*, were given and continue to be given massive amounts of visibility and, in many quarters, even credibility. (See Endnote 2 about a possible future report on how giving visibility and credibility to the terms *misinformation* and *disinformation* depreciates the value of information)

Second, it was documented in [The Inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information](#), that the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation* are popular, no question.

In the September, 2020 publication, a Google search yielded about 58,000,000 results for the two terms, and as of this writing on December 17, 2020 the combined figure is about 59,600,000 results.

However, to put the notion of popularity in perspective when it comes to racking up Google results, which are the number of web pages on which a search term appears, consider this scenario.

If Trump lies 29,000 times and each of those lies may be characterized by one or both of *disinformation* or *misinformation* by numerous social media or broadcast media web pages over four years, then a basis is in place for many tens of millions of Google results which are based on lies.

Moreover, if Trump continues to lie at that rate, or even half that rate, and the lies continue to generate multiple mentions of *disinformation* or *misinformation* on web pages, and Google continues to log those mentions as results which are based on lies, then the two terms become even more popular.

That is not only a form of endorsement for whatever the concocted nonsense terms *disinformation* and *misinformation* might be construed to mean, but it is also an assault on the meaning and value of information due to the implied association with its “bastard cousins”.

Finally, Trump is not the only purported liar to have his baseless statements treated as results on Google. And, he is just one of millions of people who have no interest in science or methodologically designed research, which means by definition that few if any statements authored by him and many others contain science-based information.

So there we have it; beyond a shadow of a doubt *disinformation* and *misinformation* are concocted nonsense terms, but they are easy to use and serve whatever purposes the users intend, which makes them highly popular in both the social media and broadcast media venues, regardless of their bogus nature.

Third, and despite the concocted nonsense factor and the bogus nature of both of the *disinformation* and *misinformation* terms, the popularity bell has been rung and the initial report underlined a harsh reality.

Due to the popular acceptance of the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation*, it is a very difficult task to persuade politicians, politicians' agents, political parties, government agencies, vested tech interests like Google and Facebook, social media and broadcast media players, as well as academics and the citizen populace, to "clean up their acts" by using language which enlightens and informs, and by not perpetuating the use of the concocted nonsense terms, *disinformation* and *misinformation*.

A recent story in that regard involves Donald Trump, arguably the most prolific liar in American presidential history, and one of the most significant contributors to the mentions of *disinformation* and *misinformation* in social and broadcast media.

(https://news.yahoo.com/twitter-now-alerts-trump-biden-124632118.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=ma)

In that article the terms information and 'misinformation' are treated as equals, more or less, but in the language of false equivalence the article provides a classic example of what is bizarre about the notion of linking these two terms in any way.

On the one hand, no synonyms are associated with information in the article, because they are not needed and serve no value-added communication purpose.

However, of the several synonyms associated with 'misinformation' – baseless, baseless allegation, lies, misleading claims, and misleading statements – none of them, not one of them, nor any of their dozens of synonyms, has anything whatsoever to do with information of any kind.

And, yet, there they are, information and 'misinformation', side-by-side like two sides of a common coin, in a story by a reputable news organization.

This absence of any sign of language discrimination is disconcerting to the point of despair.

Fourth, while Google's search engines can scan millions and even billions of web pages in short order, by no means are all statements using the terms *disinformation* or *misinformation* on web pages.

As cases in point, one-on-one verbal and digital communications among billions of individuals may not be on web pages, and verbal and digital communications among billions of individuals belonging to public interest groups, private interest groups, and other entities may not be on web pages.

Consequently, what Google compiles from web pages for queries about *disinformation* or *misinformation* could be similar to the tip-of-the-iceberg metaphor, that is, there is a much higher degree of usage of these terms than is represented by Google results.

Those comments outline the disconcerting but realistic sense of foreboding which I perceived upon completing the original report.

Namely, things do not look promising about the future of information in a world in which two concocted nonsense terms are seemingly shown undue regard at the expense of information, which is the basis of knowledge.

And then, as serendipity would have it, one day while having lunch I decided to watch television, and not just any television program. For reasons that escape, on that day I decided to watch The Ontario Parliament Network, a television channel which broadcasts the parliamentary proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

It was while watching the Ontario Legislative Assembly session on December 1, 2020 that I witnessed an exchange between a Conservative government member and the Acting Speaker which was an ear-opener, an eye-opener, and a mind-opener about:

1. The validity of my position regarding the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation*;
2. The possibility that by tuning in to the Ontario Legislative Assembly channel for a particular session, I had stumbled upon a mechanism that might have a major impact on politicians' use of the terms *disinformation* and *misinformation*; and
3. Given that Canadians are ranked as the most literate people in the world, it could come to pass that Canadian politicians and citizens join in common cause and reject using *disinformation* and *misinformation* in their discourse because they are concocted nonsense terms which are having a major, negative effect on communications across Canada and around the globe.

C. Documenting the First Encountered Ruling on the Term 'Misinformation' for a Legislative Assembly in Canada

The next several pages present the emails and the text from Hansard (Ontario Legislative Assembly) which put the 'misinformation' ruling in a very different light from that which characterizes more than 99% of the Google results for that term.

The encounter begins with a communication to The Speaker, Ontario Legislative Assembly. The Speaker, Ontario Legislative Assembly, is the Hon. Ted Arnott, PC (Wellington-Halton Hills). Mr. Arnott was presiding when I joined the broadcast, and one of his interventions was to instruct a government member to withdraw the term "misleading".

Later in the session, Speaker Arnott was replaced by The Acting Speaker Mr. Percy Hatfield, NDP (Windsor-Tecumseh). However due to being distracted by telephone interruptions and package deliveries, I was not aware when I sent the email that Mr. Hatfield had replaced Mr. Arnott, and that it was The Acting Speaker, Mr. Hatfield, who ruled on the term 'misinformation'.

It was not until I reviewed Hansard that I became aware of that fact.

(<https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/house-documents/parliament-42/session-1/2020-12-01/hansard>). I have since extended apologies to all for my error.

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellar.barry@gmail.com]

Sent: Tuesday, December 1, 2020 8:13 PM

To: ted.arnott@pc.ola.org

Subject: "Misinformation" Ruling, Well Done

Good evening Mr. Speaker,

This is likely my first-ever communication to any Speaker of any jurisdiction, but I heard something during today's Legislative Assembly which prompts this letter.

To my great surprise, and pleasure, you informed a member of the government side something to the effect that the word "misinformation" needed to be withdrawn.

I wholeheartedly agree with your decision, and recently wrote a report in that regard which appears to have considerable traction.

The report is titled [The inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information](#). The link leads to the report.

My research demonstrates that “disinformation” and “misinformation” are actually nonsense terms which are used to cover a multitude of communications sins, so to speak, and very frequently the sins are committed by users who wish to cast aspersions but without evidence to support the claims.

Hence, they piggyback the two nonsense terms on the powerful and legitimate term “information”, and seemingly hope to make themselves seem intelligent while disparaging someone else.

Mr. Speaker, I believe we may agree that such language and attitude is not parliamentary, is not nice, and is not a productive contribution to the public policy process.

Again, it made me smile at how neatly you handled the matter, and the good manners of the MPP who withdrew the remark. Well done.

I believe it would be very much in the public interest if you and your office continue to play an instrumental role in ensuring that our elected representatives occupy themselves with information, and do not engage in using nonsense terms in the legislature while deliberating public business.

Thank you, and Best Wishes

Barry Wellar

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Which brings us to the Hansard Record of the reference to “misinformation”, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Dec. 1, 2020.

This is my first encounter with the term “misinformation” in any version of Hansard, and in recognition of that finding the meta-data about this issue and the text containing reference to “misinformation” are reproduced.

The term of interest is bolded and highlighted for ease of finding.

A point to be emphasized for those who are not familiar with the language used in parliamentary debates is that politicians go to great lengths to find disparaging terms which make it under the wire as parliamentary language.

And, quite often, even if they know that a term will be categorized as unparliamentary and followed by an instruction to withdraw, they use it anyway.

By way of illustration, politicians noodle around with subtle profanities, and employ a variety of terms to cast doubt on a statement, report, etc., including such regulars as ambiguous, distort, distortion, doubtful, dubious, exaggeration, fabricate, fabrication, false, falsehood, fantasy, fiction, fictitious, foolishness, fraudulent, invention, lie, mislead, misled, misleading, misrepresent, misrepresentation, mistruth, mystery, mysterious, nonsense and especially sheer nonsense, tall story, untruth, whimsy, and for the more erudite, out of whole cloth.

However, on this day my reading reveals that only “mislead” and “misinformation” were flagged. The following text captures the “misinformation” exchange.

<https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/house-documents/parliament-42/session-1/2020-12-01/hansard>

December 1, 2020

42nd Parliament, 1st Session

Hansard Transcript

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF
ONTARIO**

**ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE
L'ONTARIO**

The House met at 0900.

The Speaker (Hon. Ted Arnott).

ORDERS OF THE DAY

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1er DÉCEMBRE 2020 ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO 10981

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): One of the parliamentary assistants will reply. She'll have up to five minutes. I turn to the member for Barrie–Innisfil.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the member for Guelph and answer his questions. I want to assure members of the House that our government is firmly committed to protecting Ontario's residents and communities against the impacts of flooding. We also recognize the problem of flooding is increasing as a result of extreme storms brought on by global climate change, and the honourable member does claim that we are gutting the ability of conservation authorities to protect Ontarians against the effects of flooding and enabling the government to override decisions supported by science. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth, and this is a misrepresentation. Our government understands the value of conservation authorities.

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. .
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The proposed changes we are doing moving forward will fix this and will bring conservation authorities back to their core mandate and address the very concerns the member opposite is raising. **Misinformation** [bold orange added] suggesting that the government is gutting conservation authorities or intervening in their operations simply in the interest of developers is not based on fact.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I would caution the member: If the word **misinformation** [bold orange added] was used, I would ask you to withdraw and never to repeat that again.

Ms. Andrea Khanjin: Withdraw. Thank you, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): Thank you very much.

For those unfamiliar with Canadian politeness, and especially Speaker politeness in a parliamentary context, a word about the comment from Acting Speaker Hatfield may be informative. The pertinent Hansard extract is:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Percy Hatfield): I would caution the member: If the word **misinformation** [bold orange added] was used, I would ask you to withdraw and never to repeat that again.

The careful reader will note that Mr. Hatfield premised his caution with the word "if", as in "if the word misinformation was used", and then he brings down the hammer, or gavel in this case, by a caution which wastes no words in getting out a very clear message,

"I would ask you to withdraw and never to repeat that again."

As feedback suggests, many of us have heard similar admonitory language, as in “Do not make me come over there”, or “Do not make me come up there”, and it appears likely that MPP Khanjin and other MPPs will take this warning to heart, namely, “never to repeat that again”.

It is appropriate to close by noting that it was a very full day in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, and congratulations are again extended to Acting Speaker Hatfield for his attention to detail by flagging “misinformation”, and for his no-nonsense admonition, “ ... never to repeat that again”.

And there it is; my first encounter with “misinformation” in Hansard, which is taken as a signal about the potential value in digging deeper and wider into this body of literature (more in Section E) by contacting more Speakers of Legislative Assemblies and examining more Hansard transcripts.

D. Communications with The Speaker, House of Commons, Regarding Use of the Term “Misinformation” in Parliamentary Speeches and Debates

As a former federal civil servant, 1972-1979, and subsequently as a professor and a consultant, I prepared questions and comments for Ministers, MPs, and MPPs. However, I do not recall ever using, hearing, or seeing the term “misinformation” in any legislative assembly-related statements or records of statements.

But, that was then and this is now, which prompted sending a communication to The Speaker, House of Commons, Parliament of Canada, regarding the Ontario ruling about “misinformation”.

To be clear, my interest in this matter at the federal level is not with regard to the general matter of parliamentary language at a code of conduct level, which is described by such documents as <https://www.ourcommons.ca/procedure-book-livre/document.aspx?sbdid=ea8c92eb-0a42-4c61-a82e-d3ed72c63f0f&sbpid=17bafb27-07fe-4f9f-b9d1-4342f7416165>.

Rather, my focus is on challenging the use of the term *misinformation* in ways that might suggest, imply, infer, portend, etc., that *misinformation* has a relationship of some kind with information. That is, and given my research finding that *misinformation* is a concocted nonsense term at best, my interest is in having the term *misinformation* ruled unparliamentary because it is deemed concocted nonsense, and in my opinion is not a term to be used by Canada’s federal parliamentarians.

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellar.barry@gmail.com]
Sent: Wednesday, December 2, 2020 2:35 PM
To: Anthony.Rota@parl.gc.ca
Cc: carol.hughes@parl.gc.ca
Subject: FW: "Misinformation" Ruling, Well Done

The Honourable Anthony Rota
MP Nipissing-Timiskaming
Speaker, House of Commons

Good afternoon Mr. Speaker,

This is one of my very few communications to any Speaker of any jurisdiction, but I heard something during yesterday's Ontario Legislative Assembly which prompts this letter.

To my great surprise, and pleasure, the Speaker informed a member of the government side something to the effect that the word "misinformation" needed to be withdrawn.

I wholeheartedly agree with the advisement, and recently published a report in that regard which appears to have considerable traction.

The report is titled, [The Inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information.](#) The link leads to the report.

My research reveals that "disinformation" and "misinformation" are actually nonsense terms which have nothing whatsoever to do with information, and are used to cover a multitude of communications sins, so to speak, and very frequently the sins are committed by users who wish to cast aspersions but without evidence to support the claims, or without making the effort to use the correct term, such as lie, deception or misrepresentation.

Hence, they piggyback the two nonsense terms on the powerful and legitimate term "information", and seemingly hope to make themselves seem intelligent while disparaging someone else through the course of pejorative language.

Mr. Speaker, I believe we may agree that such language and attitude is not parliamentary, is not nice, and is not a productive contribution to the public policy process.

I believe it would be very much in the public interest if you, Deputy Speakers, and your offices play an instrumental role in ensuring that our elected representatives occupy themselves with information, and do not engage in using nonsense terms in the House of Commons while deliberating public business.

I welcome receiving a response in the event that more work needs to be done in order to consign the terms “disinformation” and “misinformation” to the scrap heap of unparliamentary language.

Thank you, and Best Wishes

Barry Wellar

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With respect to options regarding the disposition of my inquiry, it is widespread experience that citizens' communications to politicians at all levels may be accorded several kinds of treatment, including:

- pertinent, timely, informed responses;
- 'boilerplate' responses containing no information of value;
- messages that communications have been received, end of story; and,
- no response whatsoever.

Two recent projects involving surveys of federal, provincial (Ontario), and municipal (City of Ottawa) politicians provide details in that regard, and confirm that all the above are among the options practiced by politicians in their communications with citizens and journalists. (*[Chronicling the Use of Transparency and Accountability as Political Buzzwords, and as Drivers Ensuring the Standard of Access to Public Records in Canada is Best Practice](#)*, and *[Investigating the Need for Structural and Functional Reform of Ottawa Police Service and Ottawa Police Services Board](#)*)

Based on the surveys, and in particular the notable failure of federal politicians (Liberals), to respond to questions about access to public records, I invited The Speaker to provide guidance to assist with my 'mission';

“I welcome receiving a response in the event that more work needs to be done in order to consign the terms “disinformation” and “misinformation” to the scrap heap of unparliamentary language “

A response was received, as follows.

From: Speaker.President@parl.gc.ca [mailto:Speaker.President@parl.gc.ca]

Sent: Wednesday, December 16, 2020 1:55 PM

To: wellar.barry@gmail.com

Subject: Unparliamentary language

Dear Dr. Wellar:

Attached please find a letter, signed by the Hon. Anthony Rota, MP, Speaker of the House of Commons in response to your electronic message of December 2, 2020 on the above-mentioned subject.



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

THE SPEAKER
LE PRÉSIDENT

OTTAWA, CANADA
K1A 0A6

December 16, 2020

Dr. Barry Wellar, C.M., GISP
Professor Emeritus, University of
Ottawa President, Information Research
Board Inc. 133 Ridgefield Crescent
Nepean, ON K2H
6T4 CANADA
wellar.barry@gmail.com

Dear Dr. Wellar:

I am writing in response to your message of December 2, 2020 and your recommendation to identify the words “misinformation” and “disinformation” as unparliamentary.

In your letter, you noted that the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario

asked an MPP to withdraw the word “misinformation” at the legislature’s sitting of December 1, 2020. In fact, I believe that the phrase that was withdrawn was “highly misleading”. More to the point, unparliamentary language is usually assessed by a number of factors in addition to the words themselves. *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Third Edition, 2017 states in the chapter on [rules of order and decorum](#): “In dealing with unparliamentary language, the Speaker takes into account the tone, manner and intention of the Member speaking, the person to whom the words at issue were directed, the degree of provocation, and most important, whether or not the remarks created disorder in the Chamber. Thus, language deemed unparliamentary one day may not necessarily be deemed unparliamentary on another day.”

Though you would seem to prefer other words such as “lie, deception, or misrepresentation”, over the words “misinformation” and “disinformation”, the latter two are in common use and, in given circumstances, could meet the threshold for unparliamentary language since it could be interpreted as a direct charge or accusation against a Member.

As explained above, this would depend on the context, tone and degree to which the House reacted to the use of the term. It is my task as Speaker to gauge the situation and determine whether an intervention is necessary to maintain proper order and decorum. This is in keeping with my overall responsibility to assist the House as it considers and debates its business.

Thank you for your interest in the work of the House of Commons.

Sincerely,



Hon. Anthony Rota, M.P.

Examination of the communication from Speaker Rota revealed one matter to clarify, and one matter to put on hold for possible further discussion. The following comments are the basis of the same-day reply email in those regards.

First, the statement, “In fact, I believe that the phrase that was withdrawn was ‘highly misleading’” is indeed correct, and it does refer to a phrase that was withdrawn.

However, that is not the phrase to which I refer.

The subject heading for my email to The Speaker, Ontario Legislative Assembly, and forwarded to The Speaker, House of Commons is, "**Subject:** FW: "Misinformation" Ruling, Well Done". Again, my focus is on the term "misinformation" and not the term "misleading".

Second, the reply from The Speaker, House of Commons, reflects the 'living language' concept which has been in place for centuries, and represents the thought that language evolves and societies, including institutions, evolve accordingly as part of that process.

However, my concern is that discourse in Canada's national legislative assembly should rise above meeting a low common denominator, which may be measured by the current popularity of a term or phrase which can be here today and gone tomorrow.

Further, I suggest that Canada's national legislative assembly should do better than parroting terms that have origins of most dubious character.

Specifically, it appears fair to say that less than one per cent (1%) of users of the term "disinformation" are aware that it was coined almost 100 years ago by Josef Stalin, former Premier of the Soviet state, and that it was created and promoted under the auspices of Stalin, as a western democracy synonym for "propaganda". (See Endnote 4 for a brief comment on this matter)

Moreover, the same percentage of less than 1% likely holds for users who understand that "misinformation" and "disinformation" have nothing whatsoever to do with information, or that they are just concocted nonsense terms which have attained a level of popular status which belies their bogus epistemological nature.

All that said, however, and as noted in the communication from Speaker Rota, there are longstanding traditions and practices concerning the language used in the House of Commons. As a result, my reply to Speaker Rota bears those traditions and practices in mind when requesting that further consideration be given to an alternative interpretation of the suitability of the term 'misinformation' in House of Commons discourse.

From: Barry Wellar [mailto:wellar.barry@gmail.com]

Sent: Wednesday, December 16, 2020 8:18 PM

To: Speaker.President@parl.gc.ca

Cc: ted.arnott@pc.ola.org; PHatfield-QP@ndp.on.ca; carol.hughes@parl.gc.ca

Subject: RE: Parliamentary language

Hon. Anthony Rota, MP

The Speaker

House of Commons

Parliament of Canada

Dear Speaker,

Thank you for your prompt response.

Examination of Hansard (Ontario) confirms that you are correct; the term “misleading” was used in an Ontario Legislative Assembly on December 1, 2020. By instruction of the Ontario Speaker to the government member, the term was withdrawn.

However, and as per the attachment, I am correct that the term “misinformation” was also used. The pertinent section of Hansard is highlighted for your convenience. This term, by instruction of the Ontario (Acting) Speaker to another government member, was also withdrawn. (Note: The pertinent section of Hansard (Ontario) was included as an attachment in the email to Speaker Rota)

Further to your kind explanation, I agree with the observation that “misinformation” is a popular term, having made that point in the report that I listed, and for which a link was provided. For convenience it is included here: [The inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information.](#)

Google, as you are no doubt aware, can be useful with regard to obtaining results for the popularity of terms used in productions. However, it is far less useful on the matter of substance, and that is the point of my communications.

Setting popularity aside, my report argues that among other deficiencies “disinformation” and “misinformation” are nonsense terms that have nothing whatsoever to do with information, and are also misleading because they are nonsense terms.

It therefore appears fair to say that the Speaker function of the Ontario Legislative Assembly had a banner day by informing members that both “misleading” and “misinformation” are terms which are not acceptable, and are to be withdrawn.

Now, whether they are acceptable as parliamentary language in the House of Commons is not my call, of course, but as a Canadian citizen I am less than impressed when Members of Parliament can engage in using nonsensical and misleading terms but, perhaps, my expectations are too high as to what constitutes parliamentary language in the House of Commons. Or, are they?

As you may be aware, Canadians are rated as the most literate people in the world. It strikes me as odd, indeed quite unbecoming, that for even a moment anyone would consider it acceptable that MPs talk down to Canadians by using complete nonsense terms such as “disinformation” and “misinformation” when engaged in discourse about the past, present, and future of the country.

I close by again complimenting the Speakers, Ontario Legislative Assembly, for raising the language and integrity bars for MPPs, and by suggesting that Speakers, House of Commons, could significantly improve the quality of debate in the House by holding MPs to a higher standard of discourse and informing them that the term “disinformation” or “misinformation” is not to be used and, if used, is to be withdrawn.

And, in the spirit of the Ontario message if I may be so bold, the admonition “...is not to be repeated” might be in order.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,

Barry Wellar

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The above communication has not received a reply from The Speaker, House of Commons, so as of this writing his position remains as stated, namely,

“Though you would seem to prefer other words such as “lie, deception, or misrepresentation”, over the words “misinformation” and “disinformation”, the latter two are in common use and, in given circumstances, could meet the threshold for unparliamentary language since it could be interpreted as a direct charge or accusation against a Member.”

What we have then in terms of rulings, is one which categorically says “No” about using the term ‘misinformation’ in the Ontario legislative assembly, and one which says “It depends” about using the term ‘misinformation’ in the federal House of Commons.

This difference in rulings is instructive for survey design purposes, because a 'heads up' is given about the need to include options in survey questions, or to ensure that variations in responses can be readily incorporated when tallying the results about rulings, and the reasons for the rulings.

The next section discusses the various bodies of literature in which the term 'misinformation' could be published and, in particular, that body of literature which is under consideration as an effective means to exposing the term 'misinformation' as concocted nonsense, and to diminishing its presence in public discourse.

E. Investigating Bodies of Literature Containing the Term Misinformation

Nine bodies of literature are identified in the study, Geography and the Media, which was undertaken in 2005 for the Council on Geographic Education, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and the Canadian Association of Geographers. While the intended audience for the report was academics and journalists, the broad scope of the research design means the results are applicable to this pilot study (http://www.cangeoeducation.ca/programs/geoliteracy/docs/symposium_june2005_media_wellar.pdf). The nine bodies of literature and examples for each body are shown in Table 1.

In the case of the pilot study, the question about which body of literature to deal with first was a 'no-brainer'. That is, the decision to watch the proceedings of the Ontario Legislative Assembly session on December 1, 2020 led to witnessing what for me was an unprecedented exchange between a government member who used the term 'misinformation' and was instructed by the Acting Speaker to withdraw the term.

Again, this is the first substantive source I have located which raises even a bit of fuss about the use and misuse of the term 'misinformation', and this finding includes reviews of comments about 'misinformation' by academics in social media and broadcast media.

Indeed, because of what I regard as major shortcomings in academic-based statements that I have encountered, the rulings by Speakers appear to have far more potential than academic literature as a means to dissipate the murk in which the term 'misinformation' is encased. (Endnote 4 raises several concerns about academic-based materials)

As noted in Section C, legislative assembly speeches and comments are recorded as Hansard transcripts, which belong to the body of literature labelled Corporate/Institutional-Public Literature.

Companion materials in this body of literature include such productions as constitutions, accords, laws, by-laws, Acts, authorizations, manifestos, Speeches from the Throne,

public presentations and addresses by politicians, records, Cabinet Documents, Official Plans, manuals, agreements, maps, files, tapes, images, etc., produced by governments and government agencies at all levels in jurisdictions across Canada.

Further, due to the compounding factor, the massive and widely distributed volumes of literature created by governments in Canada precipitate many more productions and communications on the parts of citizens, journalists, businesses, academics, etc.

Clearly, the potential for getting a foothold into this literature via Speakers' rulings makes it the prime candidate to examine in a follow-on study to the report, [The Inescapable Truth about Disinformation and Misinformation? They have NOTHING at all to do with Information.](#)

The premise of the pilot study research is that if a number of Speakers across Canada preclude or stringently restrict use of the term 'misinformation' in legislative assembly sessions, then that could be the thin edge of the wedge to induce a significant chain of events such as that outlined in the form of scenario steps as follows:

1. Speakers preclude or restrict use of the term 'misinformation' in legislative sessions;
2. Politicians develop the habit of not using the term 'misinformation' inside or outside legislative assemblies;
3. Politicians' agents, including political party officials and media personnel, develop the habit of not using the term 'misinformation' in representations made on behalf of politicians and parties;
4. Civil servants, and agents retained as consultants for example, develop the habit of not using the term 'misinformation' in government productions, meetings with citizens, media interviews, or other communications within or without their offices;
5. Broadcast media organizations follow the provided lead and decrease the incidence of the term 'misinformation' in statements involving politicians and political parties;
6. Citizens see and hear fewer references to 'misinformation' in broadcast media stories about politicians and political parties;
7. Usage of the term 'misinformation' declines in communications between politicians and citizens.

If that process unfolds as outlined, then perhaps a key first step has been taken towards lowering the likelihood of Canadian society collapsing into an abyss of communications babble whereby distinctions between information and *misinformation* (and *disinformation*) just disappear as if subsumed in some form of alternate epistemological reality.

Table1. Examples of Bodies of Literature

1. Learned Literature: Includes journals, proceedings, books, monographs, glossaries, videos, dissertations, and theses, and is published under the auspices of scholarly societies and their member disciplines. These works add to knowledge, add to ways and means of continuing to add to knowledge, employ methodologically rigorous procedures of inquiry, and are subject to a peer review process.

2. Popular Literature: Includes newspapers, magazines, television, radio, Internet, and any other means of communicating with a population.

3. Corporate/Institutional-Public Literature: Includes constitutions, accords, authorizations, manifestos, addresses, manuals, agreements, maps, files, tapes, records, and images produced by governments and government agencies at all levels.

4. Corporate/Institutional-Private Literature: Includes certificates, deeds, permits, prospectuses, IPOs, letters of intent, maps, files, tapes, and images produced by businesses and associated enterprises.

5. Legal Literature: Includes legislation, charters, statutes, and Acts produced for and by court and court-associated bodies.

6. Regulatory Literature: Includes by-laws, rules of conduct, procedural manuals, etc., produced by and for various public and private agencies/enterprises.

7. Professional Group Literature: Includes any of the above or other kinds of literature distributed by organizations whose members are licensed and certified as RPP, CPUQ, MCIP, GISP, CPA, CMA, MD, DDS, OLS, RN, P.Eng., LLB, and OAA.

8. Public Interest Group Literature: Includes any of the above or other kinds of literature distributed by organizations whose members are not privileged beneficiaries of group activities, such as Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods, Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, community associations, Greenpeace, Capital Bike and Walk Society, Ducks Unlimited, Amnesty International, and Community Living Ontario

9. Vested/Special Interest Group Literature: Includes any of the above or other kinds of literature as well as advertising and promotional materials distributed by organizations whose members are privileged beneficiaries of group activities, frequently in monetary terms, such as the Canadian Automobile Association, Canadian Association of University Teachers, Canadian Association of Public Administrators, Mining Association of Canada, Urban Development Institute, Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and ratepayer and business improvement groups.

And, further to that end of avoiding an abyss of communications babble, a substantive foundation is put in place to expand the *misinformation* mission into other bodies of literature.

F. Next Step

With the scope and objectives of the pilot study in place with Report 1, the investigation moves to the survey phase whereby Speakers of legislative assemblies across Canada are asked about rulings on the term 'misinformation'.

Again, in the absence of finding any precedent research in that regard, this appears to be new research territory.

However, it is prudent to presume that such research could exist, and a question or two in that regard will be included in the survey design.

G. Endnotes

Endnote 1. The precedent research upon which this report is based uses italics to represent the finding that at best *misinformation* is a concocted nonsense term and has nothing whatsoever to do information.

The italics are intended to illustrate the distinction, namely, information is the real deal and so-called *misinformation* is concocted nonsense. This pilot study continues that practice, but only when it applies to referring to my research productions and observations.

In all other cases involving any body of literature, and especially productions such as Hansard and other government documents or publications, single quotation marks as in 'misinformation' are used, and if a quote from a published work is involved then double quotation marks are used as in "misinformation".

Endnote 2. Even as this report is in process I am encountering materials prepared by academics among others who seemingly have very little understanding of the data ➡ information ➡ knowledge transform process, who have no demonstrated idea about how you might even think about deriving *misinformation* from data or *misdata* as the case may be, how misinformation might be transformed into knowledge or *misknowledge* as the case might be and, seemingly, they have no idea of the harm done to the integrity of communications by casually or carelessly tying a concocted nonsense term like *misinformation* to information.

Therefore, I include no reference of any kind to those works, because they do not contribute to informed discourse. However, I will put them in a file for a possible future report, but not as part of this pilot study series.

Endnote 3. Ways of knowing include science, everyday experience (a.k.a. common sense), intuition, revelation, anatomical sourcing, and authority. What we know is that information is derived from data using science, and only science, none of the other ways of knowing produce valid, reliable, verifiable, reproducible information. However, what is seemingly unknown is “Which way or ways of knowing is or are used to derive *misinformation*, whatever that might be, and how is that done, exactly?”

As a case in point, consider the investigation into the ways of knowing employed by Donald Trump, who frequently used the term *misinformation*, and whose statements which appeared in social and broadcast media spawned millions of mentions of the term *misinformation*. [DOES DONALD TRUMP HAVE THE KNOW-HOW TO SAVE THE U.S.A.?](#) It was found that at most, 1 statement in 1,000 statements by Trump in his position of U.S. president might be based on science, which means that he uses one or more other ways of knowing for at least 999 of 1,000 statements.

Among the questions arising is whether anyone, anywhere, has figured how to use a non-scientific way of knowing to produce misinformation which is on a par with information when it comes to such substantive measures as reliability, reproducibility, validity, testability, verifiability, and predictability. Until that level of truth is achieved, it seems highly appropriate to describe *misinformation* as concocted nonsense, as outlined in Endnote 1.

Endnote 4. It was very clever, I suggest, for Josef Stalin to have figured out 100 years ago the advantages to encourage enemy leaders and their populations to think that they are engaged in a disinformation campaign rather than a propaganda campaign.

After all, if most people are not aware that *misinformation* and *disinformation* are concocted nonsense terms, then you have indeed done a good job of fooling most of the people all of the time. And, on the flip side, it seems fair to say that many if not most adults are far less uncomfortable with the terms *misinformation* and *disinformation* than they are with the term ‘propaganda’.

Or, to re-phrase, the term ‘propaganda’ has numerous negative or pejorative aspects, is frequently associated with an unfriendly or opposition force, and can be cause to ‘raise hackles’.

However, because they tend to be associated with information, the terms *misinformation* and *disinformation* are more likely to be accepted at face value as information with issues, you might say.

Just imagine what Josef Stalin could have done with today’s social media capabilities.