



---

Volume 73

Issue 2 *Teaching Media Literacy in the Russian Language Classroom*

---

12-30-2023

## In Theory: **Дезинформация**

Sidney Eric Dement  
*Binghamton University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dement, Sidney Eric (2023) "In Theory: Дезинформация," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 73: Iss. 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70163/0036-0252.1343>

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol73/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language Journal by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## In Theory: Дезинформация

SIDNEY ERIC DEMENT

На мою свободу слова льют козлы свободу лжи.  
“Лапек,” ДДТ.

### 1. Introduction

This essay explains the debates and theoretical insights of the emerging transdisciplinary field of Disinformation Studies as a potential set of tools for designing and implementing curricula that include new media or other discussions of propaganda and censorship in the Russian language classroom.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the terminology elucidated in Disinformation Studies can provide both an engaging lesson in Russian language as well as a pedagogically strategic focus on concepts that can motivate students to continue the study of Russian language and Russia-related disciplines. Section 2 provides an overview of representative works in the field of Disinformation Studies that introduce basic definitions and theoretical debates. I also emphasize scholarly work in Russian Studies that reveals the historical and culturally specific nature of disinformation. Section 3 takes one English-language model of disinformation and maps a published but incomplete translation of it into Russian to create an interrelated vocabulary set that can be used by teachers and students of Russian in a variety of ways. Section 4 briefly discusses some of the literature on various approaches to teaching Russian language media in order to demonstrate the potential benefits of tapping into the vocabulary set related to the theories of Disinformation Studies to augment the study of Russian-language media, journalism, and the internet for learners of Russian as a second language.

---

<sup>1</sup> I undertook the research in this essay over two years of intensive teaching in Binghamton University's "Source Project," a first-year research experience in the humanities and social sciences. I am grateful to the students in these courses for many thoughtful classroom conversations in which we refined our understanding of the field of Disinformation Studies.

## **2. Disinformation studies: A selective overview**

While the term disinformation as a translation of the Soviet term дезинформация has been in use for some time, the field of Disinformation Studies emerged only after the 2016 presidential election and has been dominated by English-speaking scholars. As the news media grappled with how to deal with fabricated, entertainment-focused content that was, with increasing frequency, mistakenly read as factual, in addition to blatantly counter-factual stories passing for legitimate news on the internet, the word disinformation came to signify a seemingly new and quickly expanding stream of problematic information.

In a lengthy report on information disorder commissioned by the Council of Europe to define the situation, journalist Claire Wardle and writer Hossein Derakhshan lay out a basic template for understanding misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as related but distinct concepts defined by the correlation of truth, falsity, intent, and harm. In this model, malinformation is information that is true, but intentionally harmful because of how it was obtained, disseminated, or otherwise used in a harmful way. Misinformation is false information that is potentially harmful, but not disseminated with the express intent to cause harm or for profit, perhaps because it is amplified or spread by those who do not realize the falsehoods in the information. While malinformation and misinformation are either intentionally harmful truths or unintentionally harmful falsehoods, disinformation is defined as information that is both intentionally false and harmful and disseminated for a strategic gain—most often political or financial, but at times just to cause trouble (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5).

Wardle and Derakhshan's juxtaposition of falsity and harm has proven productive in both scholarly and policy circles. The model for conceptualizing falsehood and intent to harm allows for a more nuanced categorization of state-sponsored propaganda and censorship laws; it can generate a more particularized sense of how and for what purpose information is produced, disseminated, and, especially with the massive access to publishing content provided by the internet, reproduced (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 6). In another essay, "Understanding Information Disorder," Wardle proposes seven categories for the various forms that the three categories of information disorder (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation) can take. These categories range on a spectrum that includes, at one end, satirical content (a

somewhat mild and contested category) and, at the other end, maliciously fabricated content that is very harmful (Wardle, 2020).

Wardle and Derakhshan's work is also important because it is one of the primary sources for governmental websites that address disinformation. For example, "Countering Disinformation," a website supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), draws on a number of concepts defined by Wardle and Derakhshan (United States Agency for International Development & Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening, 2023). The authors of the site link to the "Information Disorder" page of the Council of Europe's website, which contains a link to the full text of Wardle and Derakhshan's *Information Disorder* (Council of Europe, 2023).

Wardle and Derakhshan's theories also frequently appear in the work of scholars. Deen Freelon and Chris Wells introduce a cluster of articles on disinformation and focus on the history of the field of propaganda and misinformation studies, positioning disinformation as a new and emerging set of terms to deal with a similar but substantively new situation. As scholars of communication and journalism, Freelon and Wells provide historical context for the emergence of Disinformation Studies as a new field that reorganizes and broadens the array of concepts at our disposal to describe problematic information in social discourse. One of the valuable contributions they make is to survey the general decline in trust in the news media since the 1970s, a decline that also characterizes how many Americans feel about other public institutions in the United States. This is part of the complex information network in which disinformation currently attracts so much attention (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 146).

While Freelon and Wells accept Wardle and Derakhshan's definitions with few criticisms, not all scholars do. Media Studies scholars Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick add an important dimension to the study of disinformation by questioning the idea that disinformation can be conceptualized entirely as an individually intentional form of information production, dissemination, and reception. They question the idea that an otherwise healthy information ecosystem has become polluted by disinformation. Instead, they propose a framework that explains disinformation as a kind of problematic knowledge production that is also deeply rooted in institutions and systems, not merely the work of individual bad actors or rogue governments (Kuo &

Marwick, 2021). By considering the systemic side of disinformation, these authors provide a way to understand disinformation as a factor in the perpetuation of racial and gendered injustices, both historically and in our contemporary moment. By focusing on knowledge production, Kuo and Marwick also come the closest of these scholars of journalism and media studies to framing disinformation as an epistemological problem, which opens yet another set of disciplinary tools and conversations. In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, the feminist epistemologist Miranda Fricker (2007) connects the philosophical study of knowledge to a moral and ethical framework in a new and compelling way. While Fricker's arguments have prompted significant critiques and debates,<sup>2</sup> Fricker's work deserves mention here as a related mode of inquiry into disinformation that also articulates both individual and systemic ways that knowledge can be intentionally harmful. For example, philosophers Matthias Steup and Ram Neta draw on feminist epistemology to distinguish between epistemic harm and epistemic wrong (Steup & Neta, 2020). Their definitions strongly resemble Wardle and Derakhshan's distinction between misinformation and disinformation.

These scholars' work conceptualizes journalistic, political, policymaking, and epistemological dimensions of disinformation. However, they do not engage with the historical and cultural elements of дезинформация [disinformation] as a reality in which the current conversation, dominated as it is by concern about new media and technology, is rooted. Yet this is a necessary task, since 20th-century uses of дезинформация, at least in part, originate in the KGB's arsenal of information warfare. Wardle and Derakhshan discuss Russia frequently in their report, but their references focus on contemporary election meddling and evidence of Russia's conceptualization of disinformation as a legitimate form of information warfare. Similarly, Freelon and Wells (2020) describe the history of the term as something almost unrelated to its theoretical evolution in the current moment (p. 148). Kuo and Marwick (2021) recognize that "deliberately false information is culturally and politically specific" but focus their analysis mostly on the U.S.

---

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Vitaly Chernetsky's presentation, "Recognizing and Addressing Epistemic Injustice: Russia's War against Ukraine and a Paradigm Shift in Slavic and East European Studies," at the Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies Northeast Workshop on March 31, 2023.

Scholars in Russian and Soviet studies have begun to address disinformation and its intellectual and cultural roots. Douglas Selvage (2019) unearthed documents in archives across the former Soviet bloc to document the KGB's role in the early 1980s secret influence campaign to amplify the false theory that the United States government created HIV as a bioweapon and used it in an attempt to decimate the gay and Black communities in America. In a fascinating and yet troubling story of international intrigue and deception, Selvage relates that the very idea that the U.S. military created and leaked the HIV virus was not actually the creation of the KGB, but rather originated in the gay community at the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic (Selvage, 2019, p. 79). This is understandable, since LGBTQ+ persons had justifiable reasons to accuse the U.S. government of harmful injustices due to homophobic healthcare policies and systemic legal prejudice. While the HIV-as-US-bioweapon thesis may have originated in the U.S., it went through a number of iterations manipulated by the KGB to become one of the most successful disinformation campaigns in KGB history. Selvage's work uncovers and documents the many twists and turns in the story, while also drawing attention to just how nuanced and complicated disinformation can be. His article reveals important continuities between contemporary disinformation campaigns and those that took place before the advent of the internet and the field of Disinformation Studies. The internet made disinformation a much more useful weapon, but study of Operation "Denver" reveals patterns that resemble contemporary disinformation campaigns.

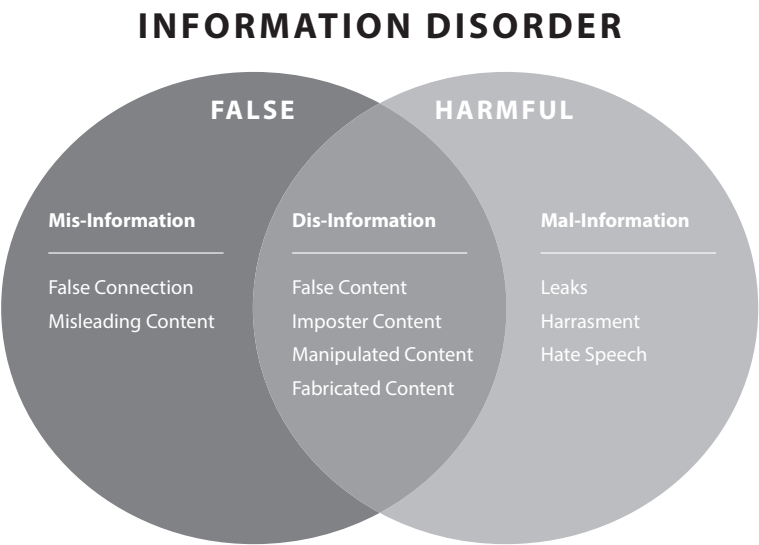
In a case study of more recent events, political geographers Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin (2018) analyze television news coverage of the downing of Malaysia Airlines (MH) Flight 17 (hereafter MH17) in Ukraine on July 17, 2014. While they do not thoroughly engage with the theories and definitions of disinformation, they do analyze the "information strategy" of the Russian Ministry of Defense in a press conference on July 21, 2014, four days after the downing of MH17, as an "information war" (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2018, pp. 894 and 897). They situate the event among a series of other "shock events—Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, the Odesa tragedy—that are at the fulcrum of a multimedia 'information war' between Russia and its allies, on the one side, and Ukraine, the European Union and the United States, on the other" (p. 911). One of the important themes in their analysis is the connection between agnotology,

“the social and political production of ignorance,” and disinformation (p. 887). Their study provides thorough English-language access to Russian and Ukrainian media coverage of the MH17 tragedy in several different regions; it also highlights the connection between disinformation and the ways that it capitalizes on a crisis of meaning to erode the general public’s sense of their ability to know what happened. For disinformation to be effective, it does not need to convince people of a falsehood; it merely needs to create confusion and sow doubt as to whether a knowable truth exists.

**3. Disinformation studies for Russian language learners**

Wardle and Derakhshan’s Venn diagram distinguishes between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation; this visually rich model presents possible areas of overlap between false information and the intention to harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). Translating it into Russian presents a compelling vocabulary set for Russian language learners at various levels even as it poses translation problems that could interest Russian language learners while also revealing some of the debates in the field.

*Figure 1.*  
*Information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), as it appears in their publication and in the “Countering Disinformation” Russian translation*



While there is a translation of the concepts defined in Wardle and Derakhshan's diagram on the Russian page of "Countering Disinformation," the diagram itself remains untranslated and appears to be a screenshot of the digital publication in which the diagram originally appeared. In Figure 2, I propose a Russian-language version of the diagram that can be presented to students as an interrelated vocabulary set that introduces disinformation as both a theory of problematic information and as a set of new words to learn.

**Figure 2**

*Information disorder in Russian*



The language in my proposed translation is intentionally repetitive in order to provide shorter, more accessible phrases for students at lower levels of proficiency: it is also admittedly imperfect. I drew primarily on the Russian language used to present the model on the "Countering

Disinformation” website while adding the common adjective-noun pair of *заведомая ложь* [known falsehood] as a potential alternative to *намеренная ложь* [intentional falsehood], which is much less common in Russian. Wardle and Derakhshan’s model was developed in an English-speaking context that references Russia frequently and yet is not in significant dialogue with Russian-language thinkers or media experts, and it is unclear how the translation on the “Countering Disinformation” website was generated. One telling slip is that in the same discussion of the model, the Russian page relies on both *информационное расстройство* and *информационный беспорядок* to translate one term, information disorder. It is useful to include both words in this model as an opportunity to teach students about polysemy by drawing their attention to the specifically psychological (*расстройство*) and more general (*беспорядок*) dimensions of what one word (disorder) can convey. Similarly, “intentional harm” and “intentional falsehood” lie at the root of some of the definitional debates of Disinformation Studies. While “Countering Disinformation” translates intent as *намерение*, it is hard to dismiss the more widespread usage of the phrase *заведомая ложь* as a potential translation. The word *заведомый* connotes knowledge, deliberation, and intent while also evoking the idea that one can lie knowingly, intentionally, in a way that distinguishes the act from an innocent mistake (*ошибочная информация* [mistaken information]).

These imperfections provide an opportunity to help students think about both the potential benefits and the growth areas of Disinformation Studies as a discipline. As Disinformation Studies scholars Camargo and Simon (2022) recognize, the field has a great deal of work to do both in theory and in practice. In part, some of that growth has to do with clarifying theories in the field: the field needs more Russian-language scholars to articulate the nuances of problematic information from the rich body of historical and cultural meaning carried within the Russian language itself. As students read Russian-language media, the *Информационный беспорядок / Информационное расстройство* [information disorder] model can provide an imperfect working theoretical vocabulary that learners use both to articulate observations about what they read and/or to challenge the information they find. In the latter case, they can propose better translations or conceptual solutions based on their Russian-language readings. In attempting either of these tasks, learners will refine their own ideas about the cultural and linguistic nuances of discussing problematic information.

#### **4. Дезинформация in the classroom? Practice in theory**

How can theories and definitions of disinformation and related concepts support efforts to teach media literacy and the acquisition of Russian as a second language? Disinformation Studies should inform the way we teach Russian-language media, because it defines intentionally false information and distinguishes it from various other types of problematic information practices like propaganda and censorship. Andrea Liebschner's application of the theory of multiliteracies pedagogy to teach a Russian media course provides a helpful framework for thinking through the practical issues of teaching literary texts, television, and material on the internet as a way to teach important media literacy skills at a time when new media challenge the fundamental ways we disseminate and consume media (Liebschner, 2017). Disinformation Studies provides one more angle that could improve students' media literacy, both for consuming Russian language media as well as having a critical apparatus for interpreting stories about Russia-related disinformation in English.

A recent article on a Russian-language media course describes how students improved their Russian by writing in genres relevant for careers in journalism and other media-related spheres (Sokolova et al., 2022, p. 101). Understanding the technical language of disinformation can help students prepare for the real-world challenges of researching, creating, disseminating, and consuming Russian-language informational texts in the digital age.

Disinformation Studies, because of its broadly interdisciplinary scope, has the capacity to inform a number of approaches to undergraduate research that could require varying degrees of proficiency in Russian. The recent issue of *Russian Language Journal* dedicated to undergraduate research in Russian Language Studies suggests a wide range of documented possibilities that involve more advanced levels of proficiency (see Janda et al., 2022, p. 1). My own recent experience in teaching "Disinformation and Naiveté" (AY 2021-22 and 2022-23) as a two-semester immersion in English-language undergraduate research in the humanities at Binghamton University suggests that students with advanced knowledge of Russian or other languages have an important edge in designing and executing research agendas related to disinformation. In general, conversations about

content-based instruction (CBI) in Russian often engage with some dimension of propaganda and censorship, even if only tangentially. Lynne deBenedette designed a third-year content-based course using the film *Стилляги* [Hipsters] (Todorovsky et al., 2008). The content-learning goals focused on the historical and cultural context needed to interpret the film's themes, while language-learning goals focused on the ability to discuss the film using appropriate grammar and vocabulary (deBenedette, 2020, p. 194). A theoretically articulated vocabulary set of various combinations of *расстройство* [medical or psychological disorder], *беспорядок* [disorder], *правда* [truth], *ложь* [falsehood], *вред* [harm], *намерение* [intent], and *заведомо* [knowingly] provides students with language to think critically about both content and the language itself. The interrelated categories could be applied to numerous Russian-language media that use the vocabulary of disinformation in various grammatical combinations, challenging students to recognize and focus on form.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay I have introduced a selected set of interdisciplinary scholarly literature on the field of Disinformation Studies. The literature shows that while propaganda and censorship retain their importance as conceptual tools in our field, we can benefit from an expanded and more nuanced terminology to describe the proliferation of problematic information. I have also proposed a translation for Wardle and Derakhshan's influential model of information disorder that could provide conceptual and lexical support to students learning about propaganda, censorship, and media literacy in the Russian language classroom. Teaching Russian vocabulary related to disinformation can help to address student motivation for starting and continuing the study of Russian. The field of Disinformation Studies stands to benefit from students who learn about it as a way to avoid the pitfall of studying Russian purely to address the wrongs committed by the Russian state: disinformation is not a Russian problem, but a global one in which the study of Russian has both practical and conceptual contributions to make in helping learners navigate the ways that intentionally false information shapes our understanding of the world.

## References

- Chernetsky, V. (2023, March 31 - April 1). *Recognizing and addressing epistemic injustice: Russia's war against Ukraine and a paradigm shift in Slavic and East European Studies* [Presentation]. Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies Northeast 2023 Workshop. Colgate University. Hamilton, NY.
- Camargo, C. Q., & Simon, F. M. (2022). Mis- and disinformation studies are too big to fail: Six suggestions for the field's future. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-106>
- Council of Europe. (2023). *Information Disorder*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/information-disorder>
- deBenedette, Lynne. (2020). Content, language, and task in Advanced Russian. In E. Dengub, I. Dubinina, & J. Merrill (Eds.), *The Art of Teaching Russian* (pp. 187-210). Georgetown UP.
- Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). Disinformation as political communication. *Political Communication* 37(2), 145-156.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford UP.
- Janda, L., Endresen, A., & Sokolova, S. (2022). Introduction: Student co-creation of teaching resources, methods, and social integration. *Russian Language Journal*, 72(1-2), 1-4.
- Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021). Critical disinformation studies: History, power, and politics. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>
- Liebschner, A. (2017). Teaching a Russian media course based on the theory of multiliteracies pedagogy. *Russian Language Journal*, 67, 5-26.
- Selvage, D. (2019). Operation 'Denver': The East German Ministry of State Security and the KGB's AIDS disinformation campaign, 1985-1986 (Part I). *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 21(4), 71-123.
- Sokolova, S., Rogatchevski, A., Bjørklund, K., Lavén, D. K., & Sverdrupsen, H. (2022). The participatory approach and student active learning in language teaching: Language students as journalists and filmmakers, *Russian Language Journal*, 72(1-2), 87-108.
- Steup, M., & Neta, R. (2020). Epistemology. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2020 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/epistemology>.

- Toal, G., & O'Loughlin, J. (2018). "Why Did MH17 Crash?": Blame attribution, television news and public opinion in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea and the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. *Geopolitics*, 23(4), 882-916.
- Todorovsky, V. (Director). Lebedev, L., Todorovsky, V., Gorianov V., & Yarmolnik, L. (Producers). (2008). *Стиляги [Hipsters]* [Motion picture]. Russian Federation: Krasnaya strela.
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) & the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). *Countering Disinformation: A Guide to Promoting Information Integrity*. (2023). <https://counteringdisinformation.org/>
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe report DGI. (2017) 09. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>.
- Wardle, C. (2020, September 22). Understanding information disorder. *First Draft News*. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>