

Memes of Misinformation: Federal Spending

Unraveling the controversial, socio-economic
and political issues behind those annoying social
media memes

Julio C Castañeda Jr

Vernon Series in Communication



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Description

In this first installment of the Misinformation series, the author tackles complex socio-economic and political topics related to the economy of the United States, such as the federal budget, wasteful spending, the national debt, unemployment and social security. By breaking down each subject into layman's terms, the author clearly and concisely presents, in an unbiased manner, the facts behind the fake news, alternative facts, half-truths and general misinformation from the annoying headlines and memes cluttering social media on these volatile subjects.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my biggest fan and most awesome wife, Misty. Thanks for putting up with my particular brand of crazy. You make our journey so much more enjoyable.

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List of abbreviations

- AAA – Agricultural Adjustment Act
- ACA – Affordable Care Act
- AIG – American International Group
- ANOVA – Analysis of Variance
- BCE – Before Christ Event
- BLS – Bureau of Labor Statistics
- CBO – Congressional Budget Office
- CBP – US Customs & Border Protection
- CIA – Central Intelligence Agency
- CPI – Consumer Products Index
- CPS – Current Population Survey
- CWA – Civil Works Administration
- DC – Washington, District of Columbia
- DI – Disability Insurance
- DITF – Disability Insurance Trust Fund
- DJIA – Dow Jones Industrial Average
- DNDO – Domestic Nuclear Detection Office
- EB – Extended Benefits (for unemployment)
- ECB – European Central Bank
- EO – Executive Orders
- EU – European Union
- EUC – Emergency Unemployment Compensation
- FDIC – Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation
- FDR – Franklyn Delano Roosevelt, 32nd POTUS, also referred to as Franklyn Roosevelt, F.D. Roosevelt
- FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency
- FERA – Federal Emergency Relief Administration
- FHA – Federal Housing Administration
- FLETC – Federal Law Enforcement Training Center
- FLOTUS – First Lady of the United States
- FOMC – Federal Open Market Committee
- FRB – Federal Reserve Bank
- GDP – Gross Domestic Product
- GAO – Government Accountability Office
- GAS – Government Account Series
- GMAC – General Motors Acceptance Corporation

- GOP – Grand Old Party referring to the Republican Party
- GSE – Government-Sponsored Enterprises
- G-S Act – Glass-Steagall Act
- GW – George Walker Bush, 43rd POTUS, also referred to as George W., W., G.W. Bush, Bush Son and Bush Jr.
- HW – George Herbert Walker Bush, 41st POTUS, also referred to as George H.W., George H.W. Bush, H.W., Bush Father and Bush Sr.
- ICE – US Immigration & Customs Enforcement
- IGH – Intra-Governmental Holdings
- IMF – International Monetary Fund
- IRS – Internal Revenue Service
- ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
- ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
- LBJ – Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th POTUS, also referred to as Lyndon B. Johnson and L. Johnson and Johnson.
- MPH – Miles per hour
- MSNBC – Microsoft National Broadcasting Corporation (news outlet which ended its partnership between in 2012 when Comcast bought out Microsoft)
- NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- NLRA – National Labor Relations Act
- NRA – National Recovery Act
- NYSE – New York Stock Exchange
- NYA – National Youth Administration
- OASI – Old-Age and Survivors Insurance
- OIG – Office of Inspector General
- OK – Okay
- OMB – White House Office of Management and Budget
- POTUS – President of the United States
- PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- PWA – Public Works Administration
- QE – Quantitative Easing
- S&L – Savings and Loans
- SEC – Securities and Exchange Commission
- SLGS – State and Local Government Series
- SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- SOMA – System Open Market Accounts
- SS – Social Security

- SSA – Social Security Act
- SSTF – Social Security Trust Fund
- TIPS – Treasury Inflation-Protected Securities
- TSA – Transportation Security Administration
- UK – United Kingdom
- US – United States of America
- USCG – US Coast Guard
- USCIS – US Citizenship & Immigration Services
- USSS – US Secret Service
- VP – Vice President
- WPA – Works Progress Administration
- WWI – World War I
- WWII – World War II
- Y2K – The year 2000 used in the 1990s to signify the coming turn of the century
- ZIRP – Zero-Interest Rate Policy

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Preface

We all have that friend. You know the one. The social media savant that posts one hundred and seventeen times a day with political rants that, most of the time, make your skin crawl. You friended them with the best of intentions, you really did. They seemed normal enough at work, perhaps a little quirky but not totally off-the-rails whacked. However, now it is too late. Unsuspectingly, you have friended not one but two of “those friends,” and they have become mortal frenemies on your social media continuum: Tanner and Skye. They embody polar opposites on every issue whether socio-economic, political, religious, environmental, or other. Left alone in a sealed room, they would most certainly spontaneously combust in a matter of minutes.

A gun-toting Tea Party ultra-conservative nut, Tanner, borders on the edge of white supremacist racist homophobe. He fills his days and nights listening nonstop to Beck (the radio host not the musician), Limbaugh, and Hannity, then regurgitating the daily dose of right winged rants in an attempt to educate his social media herd on the travesties committed by the Barack Obama administration. He blames the moral decay of America on the elimination of the “under God” clause in the Pledge of Allegiance and lack of prayer in schools. His personal hero and the best President of the United States (POTUS) ever... you guessed it, Ronald Reagan. He recently informed us that we would wrestle away his guns from his cold dead hands while arguing ardently how the AR-15 does not qualify as an automatic assault weapon. His battle cry: “Wake up, America!”

On the other side of the aisle stands Skye – a Pro-Choice, tree-hugging, Bernie-loving, Democratic-Socialist ultra-liberal, or whatever hippies call themselves this week. In her Toms alpargatas, every year she unfailingly dedicates two weeks to voluntourism travel abroad, doing her bit to save the world. She is convinced that Dick Cheney IS the incarnation of the Antichrist and that G.W. had the mental acumen of Forrest Gump (OK, she is probably right about this one). Skye has cried herself to sleep many nights since Jon Stewart retired from The Daily Show. Sure, Trevor Noah seems entertaining enough, but he cannot hold a candle to the pulse his predecessor held on America. A vegan since high school, she took up yoga a few years ago to help her relax. Most recently, her thera-

pist believes that she is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the 2016 presidential elections.

However, despite Tanner and Skye's shortcomings in regards to open-mindedness, personal hygiene, and shaving habits, they are both uber-informed. Both graduated college and seem very knowledgeable on a broad range of topics. They fill their posts to the brim with facts and figures about their particular cause du jour. Or so we believe, as they relentlessly clog our timeline with memes and headlines replete with data on politics, economics, crime, the environment, ad infinitum. You have seen versions of most of their memes. He will post an unappealing portrait of Barack looking sad and distraught, calling him out on all his supposed fiscal failures. She will counter with a particularly photogenic image of Barack holding hands with Michele, rocking those fabulous guns of hers in an impeccably fitting sleeveless dress, with definitive claims clamoring over his economic successes. They both seem very convincing in their arguments, especially with the high-quality graphics and cool fonts highlighting the key statistical achievements. That is until one stops for a second and questions – where in the heck did they get those facts and, more importantly, how accurate are they?

The Oxford Dictionary defines the words meme and misinformation as:

meme (noun): An image, video, piece of text, or such, sometimes humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations

misinformation (noun): false or inaccurate facts and information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive

Buried within the distorted half-truths of his and her memes, both Tanner and Skye present just enough recognizable and accurate claims that make their overall assertions plausible. In a world increasingly filled with “post-truth” politics (Wang, 2016), data and information have taken a back seat to pomp and circumstance. False statistics and fake news spread like wildfire on social media. The prevalent and pervasive practice of jumping to conclusions from supposed self-proclaimed informed consumers, that just glance at a bogus headline without actually reading the article or checking the facts, fuels the misinformation fire like feeding grem-lins past midnight. In some cases, by the time the corrected information makes it to the public, no one cares about the truth. Objective facts seem less influential in shaping public opinion than ap-

peals to emotion and personal belief, especially when shared in open social media mass markets.

In this installment of the Misinformation series, we will concentrate on some of the most outrageous socio-economic and politically charged memes posted by Tanner and Skye on the economy of the United States; then we will set the record straight by presenting the data as objectively as possible. We will scatter their meme entries throughout the book, present the real story, then at the end analyze their claims to separate facts from misinformation.

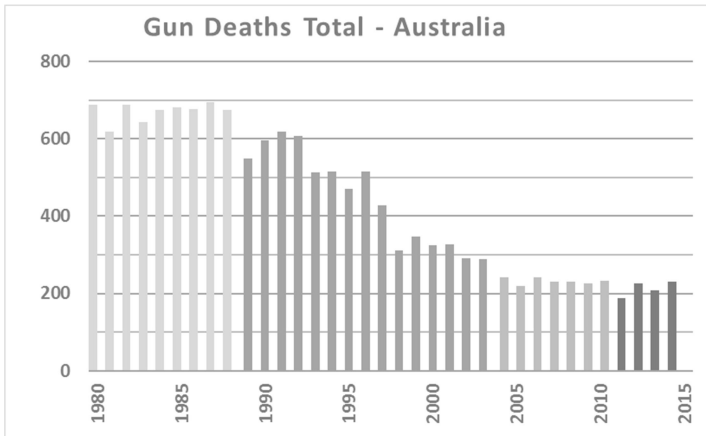
Introduction

“The art of economics consists in looking not merely at the immediate but at the longer effects of any act or policy; it consists in tracing the consequences of that policy not merely for one group but for all groups.”
(Hazlitt, 1946)

Few things irk engineers and economists more than observing someone draw poor conclusions from perfectly good data. As Mark Twain cleverly stated, “there are lies, damn lies and statistics.” Unfortunately, that axiom can ring true when the individual drawing the conclusions manipulates the data or misapplies the statistics. Whether intended deceit from a hidden agenda or technical oversight from lack of understanding the statistical intricacies of a particular analysis, false conclusions can still appear very convincing.

For example, Tanner recently shared a post about a case study of people killed by guns in Australia vs. the US. The author, of this particularly slanted article, claimed that the rate of gun-related deaths Down Under had increased by nearly 25% over a period of four years, from 2011-2014. An avid second amendment supporter, the author made an argument to undermine the success of the Australian gun ban of 1996. What the deceptive or ignorant (or both) author failed to explain was that while the annual number of gun-related deaths had indeed increased from 188 to 230 over a four-year period, the limited portion of data that he had presented did not capture the entire situation. These figures in fact, mathematically accrued to close to 25%, 22.3% to be exact. However, we can file this claim under the category of a grossly misleading statistic.

To prove his point, the biased author cherry-picked the data that supported his hypothesis – a statistical mortal sin. The chart below shows how he purposely selected his mathematically insignificant subset of data to prove his biased viewpoint (the four dark bars on the right of the chart below), and, more importantly, how the full population of data, going back further, supported the complete opposite story. By focusing on a narrow subset of the data then exaggerating by using a percentage (which made the difference look bigger than actual), he pointed out a very impressive, albeit, a very wrong metric – a 25% increase in gun deaths from 2011 to 2014.

Figure 1: Total Gun Deaths in Australia (1980-2014)

Source: Data from the International Firearm Injury Prevention and Policy

Looking at the entire progression of the data on the chart, we can draw several mathematically correct conclusions. First, the number of gun-related deaths in Australia has indeed dropped significantly since the ban of 1996. However, the total deaths had already started falling in the late 1980s, pointing to previous events or guns laws that also had a positive effect. Second, the rate had reached a steady state at just over 200 deaths per year over the last decade. Finally, the low point of 188 in 2001 stood as a normal fluctuation of the distribution of the data stream. More specifically, there was no statistical difference in the numbers since 2004. We would expect a slight variation up and down from the mean, and the 188 fell within the “normal” range. Therefore, to claim a rise of 25% since 2011 rated as a “liar liar, pants on fire” on the fib spectrum.

Taking this example even further, if we analyzed the data for both Australia and the US on a per capita basis going back to 1980 (next chart), we could establish that the Australian levels have dropped by a factor of four since the 1980s. Meanwhile, the US peaked in the early 1990s and then fell steadily to the current value where it has remained flat since 2000, albeit at nearly ten times the Australian rate.

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Biography

Julio C Castañeda Jr emigrated from Cuba to the US in 1974, grew up in South Florida and currently resides in California with his wife and youngest son. He graduated from Georgia Tech with a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering and has worked for Motorola, Google and Snap Inc. for more than 25 years in product development, R&D, and manufacturing. Over the course of his career, Julio has earned a Master Six Sigma Black Belt, been granted 48 US patents and authored numerous technical reports on a broad range of engineering topics. An avid sports fan and fascinated by the statistical aspect of sports, he has published two books in a series titled “Football Morsels” redefining quarterback and team statistics. In this book, the first installment of the “Misinformation” series, Julio uses his statistical approach and data based conclusions to provide a balanced and unbiased presentation of key socioeconomic and political issues.

Preview

In the next “Misinformation” installment, we will take a stab at presenting both sides of a highly controversial subject – global warming. In the face of overwhelming data that unequivocally points to a trend of rising temperatures and carbon dioxide, how can the two sides of this argument draw opposite conclusions from the same data set? Alternatively, perhaps the argument lays not so much on the whether the mean temperature of the planet continues to rise, but on what has caused the increase. One side, the treehugging Chicken Little camp led by Skye, vehemently blames the human race’s neverending thirst for dirty sources of energy. Meanwhile, the other side, Tanner and his petroleum-loving cowboys, shrug their shoulders claiming that the earth’s cyclic patterns are just rearing their ugly heads once again while driving their Humvees with “Don’t worry, be happy” bumper stickers. After all, let’s not forget that just a few decades ago, environmentalists proclaimed that Planet Earth was headed into an inevitable deep freeze. We will present some of the key metrics of this very complex argument for both sides, and when done we will draw some conclusions of our own.

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