

[Virtual Seminar](#)

Pseudangelia – Pseudangelos

On False Messages and Messengers in Ancient Greece

[http://www.capurro.de/pseudangelia\\_english.html](http://www.capurro.de/pseudangelia_english.html)

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List of questions by graduate students

Tentative answers by Rafael Capurro

**1.**

This article is important because it is timeless and current, as it deals with information dissemination, which is ontologically linked to psychology and the emancipation of the masses and societies. The article captures what we all often mention, but do not really understand: information both creates and promotes history. Based on information, the leader or the recipient of the information makes decisions, which produce historical facts. Simultaneously, we have the development of a network of misinformation as a form of war. The party that has the best and accurate information will win. Information (and misinformation) makes history: whoever has the power to spread it (today: economic giants who control the media, Louis's second criterion over time) also controls the production of history. Information is a necessary and vital element for the imposition of 'absolute truth' by the mechanisms of power; information can also be transformed into propagandistic 'clichés', which are largely wrong.

QUESTION 1: Is there a reliable way for societies to react or should the doctrine of power be considered fatal in the dissemination of information?

ANSWER: Power is based on "the best and accurate information" no less than on the possibility of misinformation (incorrect information) and disinformation (deliberately misleading information). Both can be checked in different forms and with different methods, and media, of which science and free press are basic to modern democracies. The internet opened the possibility to democratize information by making it easily and globally accessible but it created new forms and degrees of negation of freedom of information that you address. Democratic societies (re-)act on the basis of the Rule of Law and policies aiming to overcome the digital divide. I don't think that the "doctrine of power" is "fatal in the

dissemination of information." But there is a tendency in human nature to give up its freedom, "voluntary servitude" as Étienne de la Boétie called it. The best remedy against it is education.

QUESTION 2: Can we today (through modern media) talk about substantial evaluation of disseminated information or is freedom of opinion a propaganda of the powerful and an illusion of societies?

ANSWER: Modern media created an information environment that can be understood as an achievement of the ideals of the Enlightenment. But this achievement is ambivalent as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno analyzed in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" (1947). Since then, this ambivalence has become apparent. In many societies freedom of opinion is, indeed, misused as "propaganda of the powerful". In such cases, media become what Karl Marx said about religion as "opium of the people".

QUESTION 3: What are the sanctions of the instigators and traffickers of misinformation? Were there similar sanctions in antiquity? Example: "*Saddam has weapons of mass destruction*" (Bush 2001). Under the Bush doctrine, a ten-year war on terror begins. Bush's allegations were never substantiated and were recorded in history as false. Should sanctions have been imposed for governmental misinformation, or for reasons of public interest (which reinforce manipulation by the governors) should this behavior remain unpunished? The same goes for propaganda being launched in a central governmental campaign.

ANSWER: In a globalized world legal sanctions are difficult to implement because what is seen as illegal in a country is not considered such in another country. We still lack a common legal basis of the internet similarly to, for instance, Law on International Waters or Air and Space Law.

QUESTION 4: Do you feel that we are living in an age of post-democracy and freedom, in which power belongs to these media giants, while ideologically, constitutionally guaranteed, they are being challenged?

ANSWER: The concept of democracy has changed since ancient Greece through Modernity and in today's media societies in which the power of media transform democracy into mediocracy. This is particularly the case in a digitally globalized world.

2.

QUESTION 1: In your paper you mention: "*Media revolutions such as printing and digital technology lead not only to a "structural transformation of the public sphere" but also of the relation between the public and the private*". Could you develop somewhat more this thought? As antiquity and modernity have major

social and technological differences, what has *substantively* changed in the way of transferring the news and information to the public?

ANSWER: "Structural transformation of the public sphere" is a quote of Jürgen Habermas "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" (1962). Habermas' thesis deals with the change of the public sphere since the 19th century. In his analysis the issue of privacy remains in the background. Since internet we have a new kind of public sphere in which privacy has become a major topic. This is why I say that we experience a situation in which the relation between the public and the private spheres has changed. In a world in which everything is supposed to be public, the question about the private sphere becomes virulent.

QUESTION 2: Is fake news (in all senses of falsity) the same/less/more easy to disseminate today in relation to the past?

ANSWER: It depends on by whom! It is easier today by anybody who has the technical knowledge and the incentive to do harm for whatever purposes. In the past this was more restricted to those who had political, military and economic power.

### 3.

QUESTION 1: In page 6, you mention that in a city state, a wealthy or noble man would be considered more credible and trustworthy from a poor or low class man. Do you believe that credibility of the person transferring information depends upon his social or financial position and why?

ANSWER: My statement is restricted to the ancient Greek *polis* but it can be enlarged to other political contexts in Antiquity as well and in the Middle Ages and Modernity. A social and political position implies that the person has won a reputation in society upon which his (mostly his) trustworthiness is linked to. In knowledge based societies since Modernity the basis of truth and trustworthiness is given also by the academic and/or scientific status of a person as well as of the institution to which her or she belongs to. In other words, truth and trustworthiness are not only an issue with regard to a critical-methodological knowledge process but are related also to institutions, apparatuses, theoretical presuppositions etc. in a word to "paradigms" (Th. Kuhn) that support the credibility of such knowledge.

QUESTION 2: Under Aristotle, (your paper, page 10), it is in the interest of a tyrant to make his subjects poor, so as to be able to bear the cost of his bodyguard. Do we live today in a form of this tyranny and if yes, who is this politically expressed?

ANSWER: Aristotle says that "it is a device of tyranny (*tous archomévous turannikón*) to make subjects poor (*to pénetas poiein*), so that a guard may not be kept (*méte phylaké tréphetai*), and also that the people being busy with their daily affairs may not have leisure (*ascholoí*) to plot against their ruler (*epibouleuein*)" (Polit. 5, 1313 b 19-20). There are different ways in which a democracy, a tyranny or an oligarchy can deteriorate as analyzed by Aristotle in Book 5 of the *Politeia*. In Pol. 5, 1324 a 20 he writes that democracies change mainly because of the dissolute life (*aselgeian*) of the leaders:

αἱ μὲν οὖν δημοκρατίαι μάλιστα μεταβάλλουσι διὰ τὴν τῶν δημαγωγῶν ἀσέλγειαν

This is what we observe in many cases today.

QUESTION 3: What is the percentage that today, in this pandemic, most of the news is false? Do you agree or disagree with the view of Clausewitz that people's fear becomes the new power of lies and falsities? (page 19)

ANSWER. I am sorry not being able to answer your first question in all its complexity. I can only give you an example concerning Bolsonaro's Brazil. What I know from what Brazilian colleagues tell me the percentage is high.

People's fear is indeed a main reason why lies and falsities multiply. This is true from a psychoanalytic perspective and also in a political sense.

4.

QUESTION: In the Fourth Gospel Reading of Maundy Thursday, John (18, 29-38) mentions the critical question of Pilate to Jesus: "*What is the truth?*". The Nazarene, perhaps feeling the epidermal approach to the question, remains silent. Is superficial skepticism about the truth not only ungrounded, but also self-serving? Is it possible that we do not want to lose the comfort of our cognitive patterns by risking our power, self-interests and status quo?

ANSWER: This was not a critical but a cynical question to which Jesus cannot give an answer since the answer is implied in the question itself: There is no truth, just power. Jesus had a message of love and freedom of which he gave testimony with his life and death.

5.

QUESTION 1: Xenophon mentions Lysander's tactic of deceiving his Athenian opponents in the Aegean rivers and eventually with a fraud to win the naval battle that marked the end of the Peloponnesian War. Is this tactic of the Spartans immoral in your opinion? Do both sides have to be honest during the war?

ANSWER: Wikipedia on Lysander:

"Through cunning strategy, Lysander totally defeated the Athenian fleet, in 405 BC, at the Battle of Aegospotami, destroying 168 ships and capturing some three or four thousand Athenian sailors." ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peloponnesian\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peloponnesian_War)).

"Cunning strategy" is what the myth calls *metis*. Was Lysander's tactic immoral? I learned from Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant as well as from Aristotle that tactic is not *per se* immoral but amoral. It depends on the strategy and the goals it is supposed to be useful for. Who was Lysander? A friend of Cyrus the Younger? A Spartan navarch who defeated the Athenians and ordered the assassination of Alcibiades and who established the oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens? A corrupt capitalist? I am not a historian and cannot make a sound statement about Lysander's life, particularly in the context of Xenophon's *Hellenika*, Book II. It would be very interesting to analyze *en détail* this book and other sources from an angeletic perspective, i.e. considering the kind of information, misinformation, and disinformation that took place before, during and after the battle(s). In *Hellenika* 2,2,3 Xenophon writes:

It was at night that the Paralus arrived at Athens with tidings [news] (*elégeto*) of the disaster (*symphorá*), and a sound of wailing ran from Piraeus through the long walls to the city, one man passing on the news to another (*parangellon*); and during that night no one slept, all mourning, not for the lost alone, but far more for their own selves, thinking that they would suffer such treatment as they had visited upon the Melians, colonists of the Lacedaemonians, after reducing them by siege, and upon the Histiaeans and Scionaeans and Toronaeans and Aeginetans and many other Greek peoples.

έν δὲ ταῖς Ἀθήναις τῆς Παράλου ἀφικομένης νυκτὸς ἐλέγετο ἡ συμφορά, καὶ οἰμωγὴ ἐκ τοῦ Πειραιῶς διὰ τῶν μακρῶν τευχῶν εἰς ἄστυ διῆκεν, ὁ ἕτερος τῷ ἑτέρῳ παραγγέλλων· ὥστ' ἐκείνης τῆς νυκτὸς οὐδεὶς ἐκοιμήθη, οὐ μόνον τοὺς ἀπολωλότας πενθοῦντες, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἔτι αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοὺς, πείσεσθαι νομίζοντες οἷα ἐποίησαν Μηλίου τε Λακεδαιμονίων ἀποίκους ὄντας, κρατήσαντες πολιορκία, καὶ Ἰστιαίας καὶ Σκιωναίου καὶ Τορωναίου καὶ Αἰγινήτας καὶ ἄλλους πολλοὺς τῶν Ἑλλήνων.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0205%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D2%3Asection%3D3>

Wikipedia on Páralos:

The *Paralus* or *Paralos* (Greek: Πάραλος, "sea-side"; named after a mythological son of Poseidon), was an Athenian sacred ship and a messenger trireme of the Athenian navy during the late 5th century BC. Its crew were known for their vehement pro-democracy views. It played a notable role in several episodes of the Peloponnesian War.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paralus\\_\(ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paralus_(ship))

Páralos was a trustworthy messenger for the Athenians. Lysander used, as you write, all kinds of trickery "eventually with a fraud" in order to win the naval battle(s). He was, from the perspective of Athenian democracy and from today's defenders of democracy, a *pseudangelos*.

QUESTION 2: Aristotle considers wisdom a virtue that leads to bliss. Wisdom in practice means critical thinking, weighing the right and wrong, keeping the measure in your decisions and it is a personal struggle of the individual. How much in today's society can a person filter the information he receives from school, family, media, etc.?

ANSWER: Aristotle makes a difference between wisdom (*sophia*) or knowledge of what is permanent, and ethical thinking or prudence (*phronesis*) dealing with human *praxis* as what is changing. He considers the human realm (*ta anthropina*) as dealing with changing situations where decision must be taken according to what seems to be good for human life *as a whole*. Today's society is not the one of Greek *polis* but of the modern Hobbesian state, including its development into colonial powers until today's international unions of different kind.

How much can an individual today "filter the information" he receives from different sources? This question shows in all its complexity how far and how near we are from *pseudangelia* and *pseudangelos* in ancient Greece. Reflecting historically on this difference, i.e., becoming aware of who we were and how we became who we are is the first step to reflect critically on the issue of the society of disinformation we live in today and on the possibilities of transforming ourselves as individuals and societies.

QUESTION 3: Odysseus returned home with fraud as an ally (Trojan Horse, Cyclops, Circe, Calypso). Should this be emphasized in schools and should we not put so much emphasis on his philanthropy, faithfulness and nostalgia? What do we ultimately teach as right?

ANSWER: We should avoid idealizations and moral condemnations by showing the human being Odysseus in all its failings and his being cunning (*polutropon*) — an ambivalent Odysseus giving rise to ethical questions.

QUESTION 4: Fame was personified in ancient Greece. Today we deify the power of the media. Is that how we are relieved of our responsibility to be vigilant?

ANSWER: Critical media education is a key issue in order to promote responsibility.

6.

QUESTION: Is it possible that, whether news are true or false to us, is not so much related to the truth or falsity of the news themselves, or to the motive of the news sender, but it is more related to our own need to deceive ourselves and hear what we want to hear?

ANSWER: Our need to deceive ourselves becoming our own *pseudangelos* has its origin in our fear to face the human condition. There are different forms to deal with the *conditio humana* such as "sublimizing" (Freud) our frustration through love, art, music, thinking, or imagination, but also through trickering and filtering messages that do not fit into our personal and political life projects. In German we say: *Wie man in den Welt hinein ruft, so schallt es heraus*. Literally: as you call into the forest, it resounds). *Echo* was a loquacious nymph loved by Zeus. Hera became suspicious. Echo tried to protect Zeus (or he ordered her to do so) and Hera (as she realized the truth!) made her only able to speak the last words spoken to her. Maybe this is what happens in most of our so-called social networks!

7.

QUESTION: Is it better to develop AI systems to diagnose fake news or to educate people towards detecting them?

ANSWER: Both strategies are necessary, but without educating people, AI systems alone do not make us more but less critical and less able to lead our lives by ourselves.

8.

QUESTION: Which category of false news as classified by Froehlich is potentially more dangerous to the democratic state?

ANSWER: This depends on the situation. Tom Froehlich gives specific examples to each kind of false news and the different consequences they had and can have.

9.

QUESTION: Misinforming or as it is widely known fake news, whether intentional or because of carelessness, has nowadays grown to a worrying degree and covers every aspect of our social life. Where do you attribute this rapid increase in misinformation nowadays?

ANSWER: The reason is mainly, I believe, that we have created a technical system where (almost) everybody can spread (fake) news all the time and everywhere. In order to deal with this new situation we need different kinds of social immune systems such as free press, law and (technical) education that allow us to defend ourselves from what was called in former times information overload.

