

What does a document *do*?

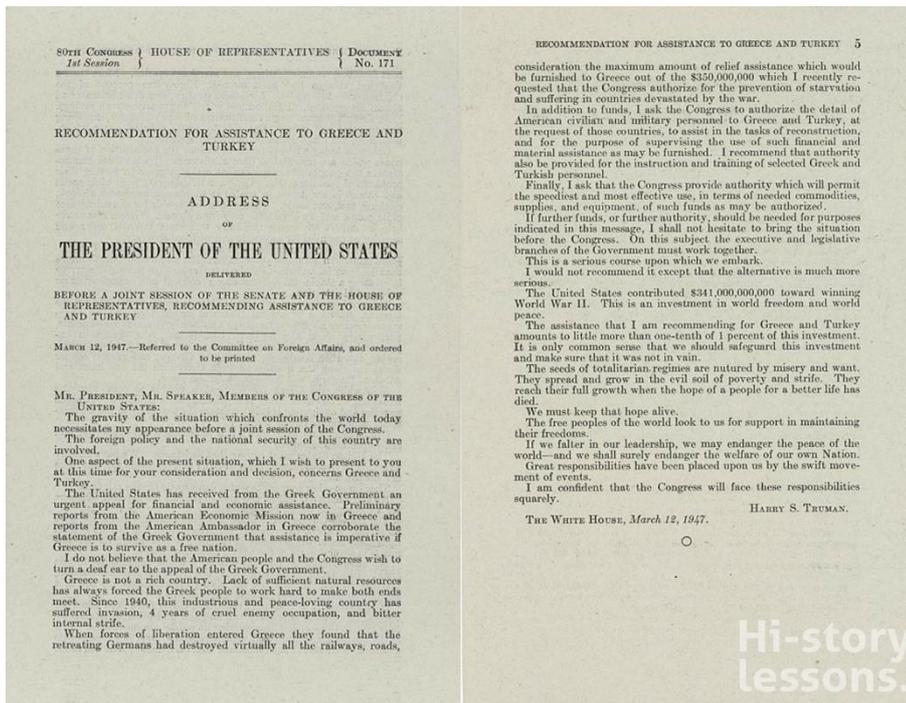
Contextual information as an antidote to disinformation and manipulation

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Documents of any type (written, visual, audio-visual, etc.) provide important access to an understanding of past and present reality. However, they never literally reflect such reality, but are always biased: their author produces a document from a specific perspective (gender, socio-economic, cultural or political) for a certain target audience with a certain goal in mind. **A document therefore not only says something, but also wants to do something – that cannot be found literally in the document.** In order to analyse, interpret and understand a document properly, information about its context of origin and author is indispensable. A real document can otherwise lead to disinformation or even to manipulation.

How biased representations in documents live on due to a lack of contextual information

On 12 March 1947, US President Harry Truman made a notable speech to Congress in which he sketched an image of two worlds: a free, democratic world with constitutional freedoms modelled on the US and an oppressed world characterized by the suppression of freedoms and totalitarian control, which he referred to as communist rule. According to Truman, every country in the world faced a choice between two ways of life, albeit, unfortunately, that choice was not free. Truman promised support to any country that felt threatened by communist expansion. His speech is sometimes considered the start of the [Cold War](#).



President Harry Truman's Message to Congress of 12 March 1947 in which he planned to provide USD 400 million for economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey. His address would later become known as the Truman Doctrine.

tot. EastNews

Secondary school history textbooks on the 20th century often include an excerpt from this speech. This real document is usually accompanied by very brief contextual information and questions that only ask for the literal repetition of the speech's content. At no point is Truman's representation of the two worlds critically questioned. It seems as if textbooks accept it as the gospel truth.

His speech, however, was not in the least neutral. By contrast, he gave it in specific circumstances and pursued a well-defined goal. Indeed, in February 1947, the British government ceased helping Greece and Turkey due to a financial crisis. Military and economic help, however, was considered necessary in the West, as communism gained strength in Greece, and Turkey was exposed to Soviet pressure. As it was feared that more European countries would follow if Greece or Turkey fell to communism, the American government planned to take over Britain's role. To do so, however, it needed permission from the US Congress. Truman therefore did not only inform Congress about the situation and his strategy, but also had to convince Congress of the need to release a budget of USD 400 million for economic and military aid to both countries. This was no easy task, as an important isolationist faction in Congress did not support the role of the US as the 'policeman of the world'. As a result, Truman sketched a very precise black-and-white image of two extremes,

full of us-and-them thinking and stereotypes. His speech had to do something: to convince Congress. Without this contextual information, however, textbook users cannot recognize the hidden meaning of the document or critically question it. Instead they are more likely to take for granted what the speech literally says, which leads to disinformation.

It is therefore important to always include the context in which a document originated in its analysis and interpretation.

How text determines image: real photos can disinform through a misleading caption

Context must, of course, be accurate. If not, it risks disinformation. This becomes clear from the example of a photo showing prisoners in the Vél d'Hiv around the time of the [Second World War](#). Many books in which the photo appears provide contextual information in a caption stating that they are Jews arrested by French policemen during a raid in Paris in the summer of 1942. In July 1942, 13,000 Jews were effectively rounded-up throughout Paris and locked up in a cycling track, the Vélodrome d'Hiver stadium (Vél d'Hiv) to await deportation. This large-scale round-up was carried out with active collaboration of French authorities.

Some decades after the war, the Vél d'Hiv event was gradually considered the low point in French collaboration in the persecution of Jews. It started to become part of French collective memory. Therefore, publishers searched for authentic photos to illustrate this event in books and magazines as, in their opinion, 'one image says more than a thousand words'. One photo gradually became used for this purpose, indeed showing prisoners in the Vél d'Hiv during the Second World War. A closer look, however, reveals that the people in the photo are not wearing a Star of David on their clothes. Also, all the prisoners have suitcases with them, which does not align with the surprise effect of the raid. Moreover, there are no children anywhere in the photos, whereas one-third of the arrested Jews were actually children. The photo itself, however, is a real document and has not been manipulated. The problem is that the caption is misleading. The photo was taken out of its true context. It actually shows the imprisonment of (real and alleged) collaborators in the Vél d'Hiv after the

liberation of Paris by Allied troops in 1944. These people had been warned that they would be arrested. They were therefore given the opportunity to get dressed and pack a suitcase. Moreover, they were mainly adults, which explains the absence of children in the photo. Why then was this photo placed in the wrong context? This was unintentional. In searching for a photo, the publishers were so glad to have found one representing prisoners in the Vél d'Hiv, they failed to examine it carefully. In so doing, it began to be misused.



↑ Collaborators arrested by Allied forces during the liberation of Paris in 1944, sitting on the steps of the Vélodrome d'Hiver. This photo is sometimes captioned incorrectly, stating that these were the Jews rounded up at the same location in 1942.

This shows how **viewing a real document is determined by the contextual information in a caption**. As it is not always possible to verify contextual information, a sound strategy for assessing its trustworthiness is to 're-enact' its photography.

You can try to bring its creation back to life by imagining the scene, as if you were the photographer. This helps to view a photo in detail while also encouraging in-depth reflection on what it shows and what the photographer wanted it to *do*.

Deliberate manipulation: how even real documents can support fake news

Sometimes real documents are deliberately misused to support a particular message. This was the case in a recent news broadcast (16 November 2020) aired and distributed by the Flemish-nationalist extreme-right party Vlaams Belang. It decided to experiment with its own news broadcasts, because, in the party's opinion, its constituents are under-represented in the mainstream media with its politically correct, yet highly distorted representation of reality. The theme of the first broadcast was 'Turkey and its negative influence on our country and on Europe'. Erdogan and his network of Diyanet mosques were heavily criticized, as well as Erdogan's policy relating to the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. A 'flying reporter', a Vlaams Belang MP, reported Erdogan had declared at the end of February 2020 that Syrian refugees in Turkey would no longer be stopped at the Turkish border with Greece. The MP stated that he had not actually seen any Syrian refugees, but only 'aggressive young men of military age' from Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. His words were supported by footage of such a young man with his fingers pointing a gun at his forehead with the words (subtitled): 'No problem, I want you dead. I want you dead.' This implies a link between refugees and terrorists. This footage, however, was misused. The real document was deliberately manipulated by changing its context and through mistranslation. In fact, the 'aggressive illegal' at the Turkish-Greek border in 2020 was a desperate refugee at the Greek-Macedonian border in 2015, who was on the verge of committing suicide. The AP news agency interviewed the man at the time, who stated in broken English: 'I want to dead. I don't have family, I don't have house, I have problems in my life, I want to just dead [sic].' Once again, this shows the importance of checking both given contextual information and the origin of a real document. Furthermore, it reveals the importance of considering and viewing an entire source instead of only a small excerpt. **Deliberately cutting real documents leads to their distortion.**

AP Archive, Migrants throw rocks at Greek police, 18.11.2016 [accessed 14 April 2021]. Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kz0Vexw70-s&t=50s>



A Youtube video published by the Associated Press titled 'Migrants throw rocks at Greek police.' The subtitle (provided by the agency) reads: '[...] I want to dead, I don't have family, I don't have house, I have problems in my life, I want to just dead.'



The same Youtube video published by the Flemish nationalist right-wing party Vlaams Belang with a comment and an added English-language caption: 'No problem, I want you dead!'



Vlaams Belang, Dries Van Langenhove aan de Griekse grens, 19.08.2020 [accessed 14 April 2021]. Available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0H9zV4MaU&t=34s>

In conclusion: critical reading can avoid disinformation through real documents

The above examples show that real documents can still lead to disinformation and manipulation. They are sometimes (sub)consciously misused or are attributed new meaning. That is why it is always imperative to determine the context of a document: who is its author? What purpose and target audience did (s)he have in mind? In what context did the document originate? This allows a reading of the real documents not just literally, but also with consideration for their subtext and hidden meaning.

In other words, you should critically examine a document by taking its contextual information into account. Only then can you fully understand a document and what it *does*.

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