Lesson 6: Social media, intellectual freedom and libraries.

Key ideas:

(1) Social media are the hotbed of information and disinformation: it is in social media where much disinformation is found, exchanged, supported and spread, and where the InfoWars are inflamed.

(2) Specific social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, cultivate, support, and perpetuate disinformation and conspiracy memes.

(3) While one can explore such media to find the origins of certain memes or conspiracy theories, there is little regulation of their content, except for the possible intervention of their creators, but such interventions are rare, under the mandate of free speech or the first amendment.

(4) There is a major concern for maintaining intellectual freedom (the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas without restriction) or the freedom of expression, speech, and the press (the freedom to say or post ideas of whatever character).

   a. A book entitled *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate About Democracy* (1989), a book of essays by John Swan and Noel Peattie, anticipates the issues of freedom of expression in social media.

   b. It articulates the tension between what one might call a liberal position (John Swan) versus a conservative position (Noel Peattie) about whether such works as David McCalden's *The Holocaust Did Not Happen* should be included in a library's collection.

      i. Swan's position is that a library is about free access, not truth, and therefore such works belong in the collection.

      ii. Peattie says that among other factors (e.g., cost, balance, relevance to patron population), truth does and should matter in collection decisions, which in most cases would mitigate against including such works.

(5) In a similar vein, Zuckerberg argues that freedom of expression must be maintained on Facebook, permitting politicians to lie about their opponents. This position of Facebook can be extrapolated to all social media.

   a. This approach seems naïve in the onslaught of disinformation on the internet, awash with propaganda, and systems (e.g., cable news, religious and political leaders, government agencies, and pseudo-cognitive authorities) that reinforce that propaganda.

   b. Is there a limit to free expression when that expression leads to harmful acts to demonized populations, the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions, the loss of expertise, and the denigration of science and evidence?

(6) There are particularly noxious forms of social media, the rabbit hole effect of YouTube, and the empowerment of hate groups by aggregating like-minded individuals around a particular forum, such as 8Chan, Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, and Zero Hedge.

(7) A subsequent lesson on digital, media and information literacies will address ways to deal with some of these issues.

(8) Social promotions an addiction to anger: https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/12/joanna-hoffman-facebook-is-peddling-an-addictive-drug-called-anger.html?fbclid=IwAR2DNvs0oJZBfjRdzAq-of8GEMPzVoeHzug0PTMIVhleUNvXNXh2emOXS-o

Social media, including Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, Twitter, Tumblr, Telegram, Reddit, Baidu Tieba, LinkedIn, LINE, Snapchat, and Pinterest, among many others, are a hotbed of

information and disinformation. According to *Wikipedia*, social media sites share the following properties: they are interactive Internet-based applications; they live on user-generated content (e.g., posts, texts, videos, photos); they create profiles for the app or website that are maintained by its social media creators; and they facilitate the interactions of members or groups (Social Media, 2019).

A book about intellectual freedom in libraries, by Noel Peattie and John Swan (1989, 2012), *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate about Democracy*, anticipates the issues of disinformation on social media on the internet. In it, John Swan and Noel Peattie discuss whether books such as David McCalden's book, *The Holocaust Did Not Happen*, a Holocaust revisionist tract should be banned from the library. Swan takes the side of intellectual freedom. In his view, the point of libraries is to provide access to patrons, and there should be no constraints impeding that access. John Swan takes a cautious view. He looks variety of controversial things that could be in libraries: mathematical and logical truths; empirical truths (e.g., the earth is round); opinions, on which people may honestly differ (e.g., right or left politics, best restaurant); matters of taste (e.g., agree/disagree with current fashion trends); moral questions: is abortion or homosexuality right or wrong?; minority theories or opinions, not generally accepted by scholars in the field, but carrying no extra moral or political weight, no hidden agenda (e.g., Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays); offensive language; bullshit; and outright lies, false statements knowingly made to mislead, frighten or hurt people: e.g., the holocaust did not happen, or black people are ineducable, etc. (Swan & Peattie, 1989, p. 33).   It is the last category that he argues can be justified in not putting in the library collection. He argues that there are many considerations (e.g., budget, cost, relevance, access) that go into the decision of including or excluding a book or other resource in a library collection, and the fact that something is untrue is a major factor for considering exclusion from the collection. In other words, in specific contexts like non-fiction, truth does matter in library collections.

Correspondingly, there is the issue of freedom of expression on the internet, perhaps best exemplified by remarks by Mark Zuckerberg in a speech at Georgetown University where he argued that Facebook should be unfettered in intellectual freedom, including political advertisements of outright lies (e.g., pro-Trump reelection campaign advertisements that utter lies about his opponents). He takes the view that the marketplace will work it out – the lies will be discovered, eventually rejected or ignored. He bases his view, as do other free speech advocates, on the 1st Amendment, but Yochai Benkler, an author and the Professor of Entrepreneurial Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, argues that this is not a correct interpretation of the 1st Amendment. He argues that the 1st Amendment is only about government involvement in speech and does not apply to private speech or private parties, of which Twitter and Facebook are examples (Morrison, 2018). Despite or because of this observation, untruths are not sorting themselves out in the (dis)information marketplace. The disinformation that is asserted is rapidly spread across the internet, any corrections are ignored, and disinformation memes reinforce a priori biases. Fox News, for example, echoes Trump's and his supporters' talking points, which are often patently false. Correspondingly, in social media sites like 8chan white supremacists will defend their right to be racist and espouse hate rhetoric.

The logic of the view that the truth will win out is a belief in the trust in the individual, which John Swan sees the censors as not trusting or trying to control:

> There are those who believe that they can devise noble universal principles of
> advocacy that exclude damned lies, or deny communication of ideas with
> pernicious regimes, and thereby concentrate their resources upon those

worthier of free expression. The idea is tempting, not unlike the idea that you
ought to be able to slip a warning label into a racist or sexist book according to
some general principle of right thinking. But it is nothing more, I believe, than
another manifestation of this distrust of the real act of independent decision-
making (Swan & Peattie, 1989, p. 22).

The view that individuals are capable of sorting out the truth for themselves seems to be the
rationale for the revocation of the fairness doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission
(FCC) that was introduced in 1949 and which required broadcast license holders to present both
sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. It was
eliminated in 1987 on the basis that it "restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters ... [and]
actually inhibits the presentation of controversial issues of public importance to the detriment of
the public and the degradation of the editorial prerogative of broadcast journalists." (FCC Fairness
Doctrine). In 1987 in an FCC Video, NBCUniversal made a claim, "Today we reaffirm our faith in
the American people. Our faith in their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction without any
help from government" (FCC Fairness Doctrine, footnote 18 of *Wikipedia* entry).   Not long after
the doctrine was eliminated, radio and television programs emerged that touted unorthodox
political and religious opinions, such as the Rush Limbaugh Show.

Obviously, this is a noble ideal, but what does one do in the midst of an information system (i.e.,
the internet) awash with propaganda, and systems (e.g., cable news, religious and political
leaders, government agencies and false cognitive authorities) that reinforce that propaganda?
In the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Is there a limit to free
expression when that expression leads to harmful acts to demonized populations, the
destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions, the loss of expertise, and
the denigration of science and evidence? At the beginning of the impeachment inquiry of
President Trump in October 2019, a American values survey by PRRI (Public Religion Research
Institute) indicated that while 37% Republicans overall asserted that almost nothing could
dissuade them from approving of Trump, over 50% of Republicans whose primary news source
is Fox News approved of Trump. Those Republicans whose primary news source was other than
Fox News had only a 30% approval rating of the President (Bump, 2019). Such data have led to
descriptions of Fox News as "Trump TV" through which virtually all criticism of or about him is
abandoned, conspiracy theories by him or about governmental agencies are indulged, factual
evidence against him is ignored, and where they and their pundits become the source for him
for "real news."

In addition to Fox News's propagation of fake news, social media are immensely important for
the spread and speed of disinformation. Researchers have determined that false information
spreads more quickly and broadly than genuine information and that those on the right are
more susceptible to believe and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the
left (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, Sinan, 2018).

> Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than
> the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more
> pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural

disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information (p. 1146).

Social media disinformation is spread by trolls, such as the Russians, and Trump and right-wing supporters on the one side, and liberals and progressives on the other side.   There are also click-bait entrepreneurs whose allegiance is to making money and generally not to either side, though this allegiance leads them to be more likely to promote right-wing ideology because the conservatives are more easily seduced with news or clicks that support their confirmation bias. (Ingraham, 2019).

There is also the rabbit hole phenomenon on YouTube. When perusing YouTube videos for a particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the algorithm that drives YouTube suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest more provocative videos to view, and so on (the rabbit hole) leading one researcher, Zeynep Tufekci, to declare YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" (Tufekci, 2018). It is claimed that the success of the election of the ultra-right leader, Bolsonaro, in Brazil was primarily driven by YouTube videos (Fisher & Taub, 2019, August 11). All this is driven by the profit motive – the more clicks, the more profit for Google, the political consequences conveniently ignored.

Before the internet, people had a much more difficult time aggregating in groups to form hate speech collectives. Physical proximity tended to be a constraint. With the advent of the internet and social media groups, it is easier for persons with radical ideas to find like-minded individuals, creating a forum with a loud voice, that in turn can convince others to join their cause. It creates a crowd effect that there appears to be a large audience for a particular theory or belief. Postings at 8chan, a social media group that permits anonymous postings, apparently influenced the mass shooter of mostly Latino people at the El Paso Walmart. 8chan is described in Slate in the following way: "An anonymous, meme-filled internet backwater, 8chan has easily been a place for white supremacists to indoctrinate others – particularly white men – into bigoted ideologies" (Glaser, 2019). Social media like 8chan not only aggregate a forum, but self-deceptively entices its followers to believe that they have a loud voice and that their group numbers are more abundant than what they actually are, luring more members to the group. Other radical sites include Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, and Zero Hedge.

Facebook is an illustration of the broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories. The problem with conspiracy theorists is that any attempt to correct their theories by appealing to some form of contravening evidence is viewed itself as verification and extension of that conspiracy theory, another conspiracy theory to attack their conspiracy theory or a sign of more cover-ups. Is there a limit to free speech? The first amendment asserts that the "Congress shall make no law. . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." But the apparent absoluteness of that prohibition had long been subverted by the problematic statement by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in **Schenck v. United States** (1919):

the character of every act depends on the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man from falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing panic. [The] question is every case is whether the words are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent (**Schenck v. United States,** 1919).

There does not seem to be much doubt that the man who creates panic in a theater should be chastised. Yet the hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet have gotten to the point where physical harm, in fact, may result in: e.g., physical assaults on Jews, Muslims, members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, etc. There is a concern for regulating such rhetoric beyond the issues of Facebook. The issue may not be panic in a crowded theatre, but support of false ideas and ideologies whereby previous institutional norms are challenged and trust in expertise are so challenged and attacked that the foundation of a liberal democracy has been catapulted into chaos, where sources or institutions are politicized and not trusted (e.g., the intelligence community, the Justice Department), thereby attacking the very essence of democracy and democratic institutions.

We are reminded of John Swan's comments:

The most effective advocacy of truth is insuring the widest possible access to all versions thereof.... ... debate, dialogue, and exploration are all essential to an understanding of truth, whatever its nature. It does mean that shutting off exposure to false information and pernicious ideas before they enter the stream of debate will in all likelihood not kill them nor protect the good ideas they seek to devour....

The basic flaw in the position of those who would defeat falsehood by denying it a place in our libraries and library programs is that it fails to take into account the simple but profound fact that the truth must be perceived by individuals, not dictated to them.... The worst falsehoods, the damnest lies, have their origins not in ideas but in pathologies, and suppressing symptoms does not cure the disease (Swan & Peattie, 1989, p. 17-18).

But how do we cope with collective self-deception, where the truth is a contrived second-hand or false opinion, paraded as knowledge? The willingness of individuals to seek the actual truth appears to be extensively diminished, given that *their* cognitive authorities have all the truth and that *only their* venues have access to the truth, and independent inquiry is fraught with seductive pitfalls designed to send one to hell, figuratively if not literally, based on one's religious persuasion (e.g., white evangelicals who believe that Trump was appointed by God). They put Socrates to death for questioning the orthodoxy. In these days, the orthodoxy is no longer 'right opinion,' but a contrived constructed reality, that one can call genuine fake news.

There are many techniques for the spread of disinformation in social media, such as bots, deep-fake videos, fake accounts that mimic the genuine interests of average individuals and hate

groups whose enticements tend to promote not only speech but action. In Lesson 10 on media, digital and information literacies, we will review potential methods to deal with some of these issues.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

(1) Discuss the role of intellectual freedom in the Age of Disinformation, its benefits, and drawbacks.   One cannot yell 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre when it is not true. Should there be any restrictions on social media or cable news channels? Mark Zuckerberg has indicated that Facebook will post political ads that are blatant lies, based on the First Amendment and freedom of expression.   See Zuckerberg's defense of intellectual freedom at Romm, T. (2019, October 17). Zuckerberg: Standing for Voice and Free Expression. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved October 25, 2019, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/17/zuckerberg-standing-voice-free-expression/. This web site contains the text of Zuckerberg's speech. The video is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcLSU17M3Lw (42 minutes).   For one critique of his speech, see Vaidhyanathan, S. (2019, October 18). Mark Zuckerberg does not understand free speech in the 21st century. *The Guardian*. Retrieved October 25, 2019, from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/18/mark-zuckerberg-free-speech-21st-century. Find two other evaluations of Zuckerberg's speech (positive or negative) and base your essay on these materials and your own thoughts. When disinformation and misinformation become the core information of a democracy, is not that democracy destroyed from within?

(2) Can you provide specific examples of social media in your experience and/or in web sites that exhibit extensive levels of disinformation, bias, deceit or conspiracy theories?

(3) For manipulated videos, see "Seeing Isn't Believing, The Fact Checker's guide to manipulated video," *The Washington Post* (2109) at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/politics/fact-checker/manipulated-video-guide/?utm_term=.cd779e27a0d0&wpisrc=nl_most&wpmm=1. See also "The Future of Fake News" at http://futureoffakenews.com/.   Can you find occurrences of manipulated video? How was it manipulated? How do you know?