

Social Media



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Social Media Outline

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- Social media as cognitive authorities
- Social media has become *the* information marketplace, where disinformation not only abounds but is solicited.
- Problems with Facebook and free speech
- In the current environment, the belief is hopelessly naïve that most people can sort out the truth for themselves on web sites.
- Controls need to be placed on the Internet to make it more amenable to democracy

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- Social media sites can also act as cognitive authorities or pseudo-cognitive authorities
- The problem with the internet is that it is a self-serve “information” bank. Using Google or some social media sites like mediabiasfactcheck.com, one can often find legitimate information.
- For many on the right, right-wing social media (e.g., Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, Zero Hedge, QAnon) is a self-serve disinformation or misinformation bank. Right-wing ideologues, foreign agents and click-bait entrepreneurs produce a deluge of disinformation of memes and narratives to solicit (at a minimum) and inflame (at a maximum) the disinformation seeker at these sites.
- Self-serve engagement is mediated by cognitive bias, confirmation bias, and steering to selective sources. Generally, there are little restrictions on the kind of content that is made available.
- Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals, more likely to fall for fake news. (Ingraham, 2019).

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Beyond specific right-wing media sources, as political commentator and professor Robert Reich argued in the *Guardian*, Facebook and Twitter are alarmingly influential. As he wrote:

- The reason 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reach 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. Fox News' viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. The New York Times has 4.7 million subscribers.
- Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly *becoming the information marketplace*. (Reich, 2019).

One of the most problematic aspects of social media are the number of hate groups and the far-right partisans that use it to attract followers and disseminate their propaganda.

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- A report of “Hate in America,” a project produced by the Carnegie-Knight News21 initiative, did a study of far-right users of Facebook, Twitter, Gab, VK, and others during a two-week period in June 2018. They tracked more than 3 million followers and compiled more than 2,500 posts from these platforms that threatened harm against Black Americans, Latinos, Jews, and LGBTQ+ people. These posts got over a half-million likes and were shared 200,000 times. This evidence shows the strength and breadth of these groups, who gain power by assembling a collective voice, despite some restrictions by some platforms (Gardner, 2018).
- What poses additional threat is the spread and speed of disinformation, and in the inflammation of emotional triggers (memes, tropes). MIT researchers Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018) found in a study of rumor cascades from 2006 to 2017 that false information spreads more quickly and broadly than truthful information and that those on the right are more susceptible and more prone to disseminate false information than those on the left.

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- YouTube in particular engages a rabbit hole phenomenon that increases right-wing radical viewership.
- When perusing YouTube videos for particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the site's algorithm suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest more provocative videos to view.
- The impact is to advance Google's profits, with dire political consequences. Sociologist and information and library science professor Zeynep Tufekci declared YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" because of these mechanisms (Tufekci, 2018). According to the analysis of *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to YouTube videos (Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Social Media and Free Speech

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- While there are concerns for groups like 8chan and other alt-right sites, Facebook illustrates a broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories.
- Perhaps the major problem with social media is the fact that anyone can use or create or propagate social media to disseminate clear lies and falsehoods on the internet in the name of intellectual freedom or freedom of expression.
- Mark Zuckerberg perhaps best exemplified this posture 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 include 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 argument, as do other free speech advocates, on the First Amendment.

Unregulated Platforms

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- Harvard legal expert Yochai Benkler argues that Zuckerberg's interpretation of the First Amendment as preventing his company from suppressing false or dangerous speech is erroneous. He argues that the First Amendment is only about government involvement in speech; it does not apply to private speech or private parties, of which Twitter and Facebook are examples (Morrison, 2018).
- Evidence shows that untruths are not sorting themselves out in the disinformation-misinformation marketplace. Disinformation spreads unchecked by any retractions (and if even they occur, the first impression is what is originally remembered) across the internet. Fox News, for example, echoes Trump's and his supporters' talking points, which are often patently false, but that is what is remembered (Affect Cognitive Bias)
- For a parallel discussion about intellectual freedom in libraries see: Swan, J. & Peattie, N. (1989). *The freedom to lie: a debate about democracy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers. Reissued in 2012.

Unregulated Platforms

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It is simply wrong to believe that Facebook as a whole is balanced or neutral and has no particular bias. The *Economist* did a study on Facebook using CrowdTangle, a Facebook tool that tracks how web material is shared across social media. They discovered that in August, 2020, the two most popular sites were Fox News and Breitbart measured by user engagements – shares, views, comments and other activities. They concluded that

whatever Facebook's intentions, the social-networking site has more of a political slant than Mr. Zuckerberg lets on. Using CrowdTangle, we compiled a list of the media outlets that received the most Facebook engagement in August. We then examined the top 35 for which data on their political biases were available from Ad Fontes Media, a media-watchdog organisation. All told, these sites received an average of 8.7m engagements in August. Fox News topped the list with 56.4m interactions in the month; MSNBC, a rival cable-news network, received just 9.7m (Facebook. . ., 2020).

Fairness Doctrine and Unregulated Platforms

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- The belief that individuals are capable of sorting out the truth for themselves in such an environment is problematic to say the least. For example, in 1987 the Reagan administration revoked the fairness doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which since 1949 had required broadcast license holders to present both sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. In eliminating it, FCC decision makers claimed that it “restricts the journalistic freedom of broadcasters ...” (FCC Fairness Doctrine). NBCUniversal lauded the decision, saying, “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).
- The emergence of right-wing media closely followed on the decision; the Rush Limbaugh Show premiered in 1988.

Fairness Doctrine and Unregulated Platforms

- Obviously, it is nice to think that the truth will always win out. But in the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Thus, we must ask, 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?
- Robert Reich (Reich, 2019) argues that two actions need to occur to bring rational control back to the internet.
 - First, there should be some anti-trust action that would break up the large providers, such as Facebook and Twitter. He argues that they have a too broad and monolithic influence.
 - Second, we must prevent such providers from pretending to be neutral providers of information for which they have no responsibility.

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- In sum, we have a diversity of sites on the internet and there are places where one can obtain reliable information.
- There are many sites where the opposite is true. Fox News and alt-right social media sites are two of the major factors that have contributed to the uncivil discourse in American society, the undermining of American democracy and democratic institutions, the decline in law and order, an anti-science, anti-humanistic agenda, and the hypersensitivity to presumed threats to one's rights and ideology.
- It is naive to think that users can sort out misinformation/disinformation by themselves: many lack the skills to critically evaluate information or to assess who are proper cognitive authorities, or they fall prey to the Dunning Kruger effect, by being unable to recognize the limits of their perceptions, much like Plato's Cave dwellers. Heavy doses of information, media and digital literacies are required.
- While we are engaged in disinformation wars in the Age of Disinformation (wars which have attacked democracies in vulnerable ways), we also have entered the Age of Inflamed Grievances, given the in-your-face stoked grievances by the alt-right in cable news and social media and the Trump administration. Not that there is not some of that behavior on the left, e.g., attacking those who support racial division or police brutality (left-wing authoritarians).

Pro-Truth Pledge

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I Pledge My Earnest Efforts To:

Share truth

- **Verify:** fact-check information to confirm it is true before accepting and sharing it
- **Balance:** share the whole truth, even if some aspects do not support my opinion
- **Cite:** share my sources so that others can verify my information
- **Clarify:** distinguish between my opinion and the facts

Honor truth

- **Acknowledge:** acknowledge when others share true information, even when we disagree otherwise
- **Reevaluate:** reevaluate if my information is challenged, retract it if I cannot verify it
- **Defend:** defend others when they come under attack for sharing true information, even when we disagree otherwise
- **Align:** align my opinions and my actions with true information

Encourage truth

- **Fix:** ask people to retract information that reliable sources have disproved even if they are my allies
- **Educate:** compassionately inform those around me to stop using unreliable sources even if these sources support my opinion
- **Defer:** recognize the opinions of experts as more likely to be accurate when the facts are disputed
- **Celebrate:** celebrate those who retract incorrect statements and update their beliefs toward the truth

<https://www.protruthpledge.org/>

Pro-Truth Pledge

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- There is good news and bad news about this pledge.
- It is good if any person or organization or institution takes and implements this pledge. It should improve the environment in which we live, by personally and professionally (when appropriate) stopping the spread of fake news.
- The problem is that it would only be embraced by a limited number of people, people who are likely to try to be balanced and truth-seeking in their behaviors.
- Having indicated that, Pew Research did a study that indicates that most Americans cannot well distinguish factual statements from opinion statements: Cf. Mitchell, Amy; Gottfried, Jeffrey; Barthel Martin; and Sumida, Nami. (June 18, 2018). Distinguishing Between Factual and Opinion Statements in the News: The politically aware, digitally savvy and those more trusting of the news media fare better; Republicans and Democrats both influenced by political appeal of statements, *Pew Research Center*, / and that is discouraging, <http://www.journalism.org/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news>