

TASK FORCE

The Donald C. Hellmann Task Force Program



Misinformation in Global Media:
Causes, Consequences, and Accountability

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Misinformation in Global Media:
Causes, Consequences, and Accountability

Faculty Advisor

Scott Radnitz

Evaluator

Allie Funk

Senior Research Analyst for Technology and Democracy
Freedom House

~

Coordinator

Isabel Gates

Editors

Edon Ferati

Zoe Schenk

Authors

Thomas Adrian

Edon Ferati

Isabel Gates

Luqi Liu

Karina Mendoza

Sanjana Potnis

Zoe Schenk

Anoushka Srinivas

Taylor Zachary

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Executive Summary

Throughout the past decade, the exponential growth of technological advancements has allowed for humanity to be more interconnected than ever. This is especially due to the rise of international social media usage. As the popularity of social media has continued to increase, users have progressively relied more on online media platforms for the casual intake of regular news—whether it be local or international—and the spread of misinformation has progressed with this shift in media consumption.

While the spread of false and misleading information is by no means a new phenomenon, social media has heightened its ubiquity to an unprecedented degree. False and misleading information is now being spread on social media both intentionally and unintentionally for many different reasons, an issue that has become particularly salient in the realm of online political discourse. The inherently social nature of media platforms like Twitter and Facebook is largely the reason they are so conducive to spreading false and misleading information, by exacerbating inherent human psycho-social behaviors with algorithmic filtering. These factors combined have contributed to the rapid polarization of media in online spaces, with the proliferation of misinformation by users and organizations playing a key role in this process. The rapid spread of misinformation is consistently displayed and brings about larger progressions of distrust in media overall, as well as throughout the modern political landscapes of several democratic and authoritarian governments.

Politicians in numerous countries have become accustomed to propagating their

political agendas online with the ability to influence large populations of listeners and supporters, regardless of whether the information they dispense has any legitimate merit to it. This has led to radical political polarization in multiple countries, where tension between strongly opposed stances on tenuous subjects like the COVID-19 pandemic have only been aggravated. Private tech companies that allow for lenient content moderation policies, such as Facebook and Twitter, have recently come under intense pressure for allowing disinformation campaigns to be fervently endorsed on their platforms. Powerful officials in authoritarian governments, exemplified by the actions of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have shown it is possible to take advantage of social media platforms through the calculated dissemination of disinformation, effortlessly garnering the attention of their supporters and allowing for their agendas to circulate and solidify while targeting media shutdowns to further hold onto power.

This Task Force report, titled *Misinformation in Global Media: Causes, Consequences, and Accountability*, illustrates the dangers of these increasing misinformation outlets and campaigns, as well as underlining the importance of accountability for the most prominent actors transmitting such misinformation. This Task Force analyzes illiberal populism, cynicism, and distrust through the lens of imperfect institutional performance and socioeconomic inequality. The curated case studies and chapters in this report display the levels of discourse that such misuse of influence can generate, as online influence has led to forms of offline mistreatment and physical violence between those with opposing views.

This report focuses on the factors that have led to the increase in misinformation spreading on social media platforms, as well as the methods used by powerful political actors to continue distributing inaccurate or politically motivated information. This report details the

extensive issues that result from increasing public distrust in the media caused by the distribution of such high volumes of misinformation. The case studies demonstrate the severe consequences of the polarization in ideologies that have emerged through the rapid spread of misinformation on these platforms. Based on these issues, this report calls for implementing policy recommendations that will increase accountability measures on the most prominent actors of misinformation campaigns, while increasing overall awareness of the dangers of misinformation.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are being made to the international community, based on the information and case studies laid out in the following report. These recommendations, meant for governments, media companies, citizens, and intergovernmental organizations, are steps towards a more free and equitable media landscape and holding international actors accountable for the spread of misinformation. Some of the recommended actions are based on pre-existing legislation in the United States and the European Union, some are based on reports and studies cited throughout this task force.

Short Term:

- On a media/tech company level:
 - Ban or tag bot accounts and government officials who are actively spreading misinformation through social media,
 - Similar to how Twitter and Instagram tagged posts with information about the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election,
 - Train employees to moderate information that gets through algorithms, and increase language diversity within staff in order to catch threats of violence or the spread of disinformation on an international level,
 - Actively vet third-party companies that are buying user information, and implement policies of complete transparency about where and how user data is being used;
- On the citizen level:
 - Actively work to increase media consumption from a range of sources,
 - Invest in local news rather than large companies,
 - Which will have a ripple effect of more accurate news on a local level being picked up by larger news organizations, which eliminates some dangers of miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Long Term:

- On an intergovernmental level:
 - Implement a United Nations subcommittee or task force with the purpose of monitoring the spread of misinformation across the globe, and how to mitigate the effects of that,

- Members would include scholars of media literacy, disinformation, and human rights, and would report to governments and the United Nations General Assembly,
- On a media/tech company level:
 - Investigate and rework the algorithms used to control what people see in order to provide a broader range of information, thus avoiding information bubbles and the reinforcing of previously held misinformation,
 - Halt the selling of information to third-party buyers for the use of data mining or advertising,
 - Hire and train more fact checkers and content moderators in a large-scale attempt to take accountability for the spread of misinformation through social media,
- On the government level:
 - Reinvest in education and close the gap between social sciences, humanities, and STEM classes, with integrated classes to facilitate informed skepticism in both science and media, and increase opportunities for students at all levels of education to participate in and learn about civil society,
 - Work to create curriculum that facilitates discussion of diversity and equity, and teaches media literacy when determining what is and is not fake information online,
 - Understand this recommendation is meant for the international community at large, though it is understood that these educational changes may look different depending on academic structures in the countries of implementation,
 - Consumers, advertising companies, and governments work with traditional media companies to create a new code of conduct for journalists, including more transparency when citing sources and a new understanding of what unbiased means,
 - Based on US regulation Section 230, draft legislation that places media companies as the responsible party of what happens on their platforms,
 - Implement protection measures for journalists, in order to allow them to do their jobs without fear,
 - Work to foster clearer communication between the government and its citizens to avoid confusion and accidental spread of misinformation because of miscommunication,
 - Possible methods of doing this include creating a branch of government meant to deal specifically with communicating with the press and citizens.

Chapter One: Psychology and the Spread of Misinformation

By Taylor Zachary

Introduction

Though it has existed since the inception of news media, false and misleading information's prevalence has dramatically risen along with the growth of social media. This phenomenon has had particular ramifications in the realm of democratic political discourse, which relies on an accurately informed public to function. On social media, false and misleading information is being spread both intentionally and unintentionally for a multitude of reasons including everything from personal agendas to the partisanship of news media. But what is it about social media in particular that has facilitated this unprecedented spread of false and misleading information? Platforms like Twitter and Facebook are built on a foundation of social interaction which exacerbates inherent human psycho-social behaviors like conformity bias or reinforcing spirals that can be detrimental when false or misleading information is being shared. These behaviors performed by social media users and organizations, when combined with the filtering function of platform algorithms, have contributed to the dramatic polarization of media in these spaces and facilitated the spread of misinformation.

Ways Misinformation is Spread on Social Media

The intent of false or misleading information is an important factor to consider when identifying and classifying the ways it proliferates through any discursive space. Whether it is fake news, urban legend, rumor, spam, or simply unverified information, intention informs the ways in which this information is manipulated and disseminated. An important distinction should be made between misinformation and disinformation, both false or inaccurate information with the distinction of the former being unintentional and the latter being intentional (Wu et al. 2019,

81). While this distinction is often difficult to perceive, particularly in online contexts, this examination classifies disinformation categorically as a subset under the umbrella of misinformation. It is important to note that both are present and proliferate extensively on social media platforms, and both spread in different ways for entirely different reasons.

Disinformation proliferates often to promote an individual or group agenda (Ardevol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodriguez-Wanguemert 2020) to seek attention or revenue (Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin 2018; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), and is often the result of the blurring definition between fact and opinion in today's news climate (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018). Misinformation is largely the result of social medias' information overload (Valenzuela et al. 2019), lack of sufficient context markers (Bode et al. 2020), framing of real news in misleading ways, and the increasing partisanship of online news media in general (Abrajano, Hajnal, and Hassell 2017; Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018). These factors identify the main ways in which false and misleading information is being spread on social media and illuminates reasons why its dissemination occurs both intentionally and unintentionally.

I. Spread of Disinformation

Disinformation, particularly in political contexts, is often spread on social media in order to promote an ideological agenda for an individual or group cause. In this context, those spreading false or misleading information are doing so intentionally for the purpose of bringing awareness or attention to something that has value to them and possibly to their contacts (Ardevol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodriguez-Wanguemert 2020, 3). This occurs particularly when individuals or groups are seeking to promote a political agenda or a candidate they favor (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 217). In the context of the 2016 US presidential election, this kind of disinformation was rampant on social media platforms. Former President Donald Trump himself

gave voice to false information and conspiracy theories to further his campaign and degrade his opponents (Bode et al. 2020, 158). Trump, along with others on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum, cited sources that were fake or hyper-partisan when defending the validity of their claims (Bode et al. 2020, 158). In performing the façade of credibility by citing questionable sources, they were spreading disinformation with the intent of misleading the uninformed. These individuals and groups participate in disseminating disinformation in order to deceive others and advance their political goals. (Valenzuela et al. 2019, 816).

Among all social media users, research suggests that individuals who are very active on social media, called prosumers, are more likely to try to persuade others in this way (Weeks, Ardevol-Abreu, Zuniga 2017, 214). These prosumers often consider themselves opinion leaders of online environments and are more likely than the average person to wield that power to persuade others, particularly in the realm of political opinion (Weeks, Ardevol-Abreu, Zuniga 2017, 215). While these individuals certainly wield unprecedented power as a result of the inherent connectivity of social media networks, group efforts to spread ideologically based disinformation pose an even greater threat than individuals to democratic conduct online. These groups are sometimes government based or contracted and are used to shape public opinion in various ways depending on the type of government (democratic versus autocratic) and the intended message or effect (Howard 2020, 32). When government-operated, these coordinated efforts are usually aimed at censorship or manipulation of public opinion. The most prolific of these coordinated disinformation efforts are known as “trolls,” who may operate independently or as tools of private or governmental campaigns (Howard 2020, 32). Trolls take advantage of social media algorithms and data analytics to target specific audiences and manipulate public perception, in addition to disseminating disinformation (Howard 2020, 33-34). Their job is to

frame important or relevant events in misleading ways to make them seem more outrageous. For political issues, this framing is usually planned around moments of political crisis or an election year to take advantage of increased social media activity (Howard 2020, 42, 50). Trolls were the primary contributors to the unprecedented spread of false information in the lead-up to the US 2016 presidential elections. Trolls targeted vulnerable groups such as African Americans or Hispanics to discourage them from voting, and framed the Hillary Clinton email incident as much more scandalous than it really was (Howard 2020, 49). A majority of these trolls were Russian-led campaigns to polarize the US public and interfere with the outcome of the election, efforts which some believe may have been successful in securing Donald Trump the presidency against polling odds (Howard 2020, 49).

Disinformation is also often spread on social media in an effort to seek attention or status, and as a way to make money from advertising revenue. Active prosumers of social media may see behaviors such as sharing problematic news as a cultural norm of what it takes to engage politically and socially on social media (Chadwick, Vaccari, and O'Loughlin 2018, 4269). One of the primary drivers of individual social media usage is to obtain peer recognition and feedback, and an emerging way of doing so is to share sensational or provocative content (news, opinion, or otherwise) (Lee and Ma 2012, 333). As this increasingly becomes the norm, status seeking individuals (those looking to be perceived as knowledgeable, credible, or as opinion leaders) are intentionally sharing false or misleading information to garner attention for themselves (Ardevol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodriguez-Wanguemert 2020, 3). This has wide-reaching effects on their audiences, who may perceive the individual as credible, and as a result fall victim to false information they otherwise may not have encountered or believed. The proclivity for sensationalized disinformation to reach a wide audience has also attracted the

interest of individuals and corporations looking to capitalize off user attention. False or misleading news stories that go viral can draw significant advertising revenue; during the 2016 US election producing false news stories about both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton earned one small group of individuals “tens of thousands of dollars” (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 217). Content producers can easily monetize traffic on a social media site, lowering the barrier of entry to the spread of disinformation as potential profit-seeking ventures.

The intentional spread of false or misleading news online is also partly a result of the blurred distinction between facts and opinions that has occurred on social media. “The internet has accelerated people’s notion that the truth is relative,” and as a result many share opinion-based information that they perceive as empirical news or fact (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 146). The internet, and particularly social media, has facilitated a paradigm in which expert consensus has been delegitimized and personal values have become equivalent to scientific evidence (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 146). Perspectives on news or facts are often being presented as more legitimate than the facts themselves, making it difficult for individuals to determine what information is true or false. As more and more media sources adapt to this news climate, this phenomenon legitimizes opinion itself as valid news (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 146). Individual users now feel emboldened to share things they believe represent an “opinion” which may or may not be correct but is legitimate regardless and should not be censored (Ardevol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodriguez-Wanguemert 2020, 10). This argument sets a dangerous precedent for the acceptance of false or misleading information online. Sharing opinions as fact serves to only exacerbate the disambiguation of empirically based news and increase social media user’s acceptance of disinformation as real news.

a. Spread of Misinformation

The sheer mass of data and information shared and created on social media platforms is one of the most common reasons false or misleading information gets shared unintentionally. While Americans still prefer television as their primary news source, research shows that as of 2019, 34% of US adults prefer to get their news online, compared to just 28% in 2016 (Geiger 2019). The rapid increase in popularity of online news has coincided with a rise in the amount of misleading or highly partisan news being spread online. While traditional media news sources like TV and newspapers are also responsible for spreading misinformation, the average individual's relentless exposure to social media and as a result to false or misleading information in general has made them more likely to share and contribute to its spread wittingly or not (Valenzuela et al. 2019). This is particularly the case with politically based news in the U.S. As an individual's political engagement on social media increases, they are more likely to be exposed to and share false or misleading information. The other side effect of the vast amounts of information available on social media platforms is the increasing difficulty users face when determining whether information and its source are real or factually sound. Countermedia sites appear to be factual by adopting the "tone and appearance of traditional news while simultaneously rejecting the mainstream press' normative values of objectivity and verifiability" (Hopp, Ferruci, and Vargo 2020, 360). This kind of disguised misinformation can easily deceive the average social media user by adopting characteristics of traditionally trustworthy news organizations. Strategies like these frequently manipulate users into unwittingly sharing false information.

Social media's increasing lack of context markers is another reason misinformation is frequently shared. Disinformation frequently appears in the guise of information from

traditionally credible sources. When it looks like real information, users are less likely to question the context of the news itself. Readers on social media also commonly do not pay attention to or remember the source of the news that they read online, a symptom of this lack of distinctive context. As a result, there is a growing perception that all sources encountered online have the same (albeit somewhat diminished) credibility (Bode et al. 2020, 157). Even if encountered disinformation has a questionable source, the way that information (especially sensational or outrageous news) spreads quickly on social media often leads to other news sources, including reputable ones, picking up the disinformation and spreading it themselves. Regardless of whether these subsequent publications further the false information or attempt to correct it, they all contribute to the spread of such misinformation regardless. A key example of this is the “Stop the Steal” campaign initiated ahead of and intensified after the results of the 2020 US presidential election. Trump’s campaign engaged in legal action as early as November of 2020 to attempt to stop counting or recount votes in states that swung towards Biden (Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab 2021, under “Metrics”). Despite increasingly indisputable evidence of Biden’s win, the Trump campaign continued the “Stop the Steal” rhetoric through rallies and official statements by Trump and others. This rhetoric was amplified by a spectrum of right-wing radicals and conspiracy groups utilizing social media channels (Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab 2021, under “Metrics”). Coverage of this radical rhetoric was only amplified by the mainstream news media organizations that covered it, regardless of the intention of their coverage (Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab 2021, under “Metrics”). This amplification arguably led to the perpetuation of the rhetoric beyond its predicted life, and may have even contributed to the radical fervor that led to the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

“Framing” in online news, particularly with a partisan bias, has also contributed to the

spread of misinformation by social media users. News stories in traditional media often have frames, focusing the reader on one aspect or important theme of a story. On social media however, framing often takes on a more deceptive role when related to false or misleading information. Framing in this context is a phenomenon in which facts and real news stories are presented in an alternative and misleading way to better fit with the agenda or beliefs of the publisher. The content is structured in a way that provides the reader clues as to how the facts should be interpreted (Valenzuela, Pina, Ramirez 2017, 806). With the increase in value of opinion over fact on social media, the framing of an issue has become more important than the issue itself, dictating both the meaning and responses to the original issue (Gordon-Murnane 2012, 111). Framing that produces disinformation is most commonly encountered on social media in relation to political issues, and is often the result of partisan goals (Abrajano, Hajnal, and Hassell 2017, 14). Partisanship in news media in general is also on the rise and has contributed significantly to the social media misinformation phenomenon. Highly partisan media often shields individuals from the truth by choosing to omit key facts and contexts to spin a story to be more consistent with their ideological goals (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 142-143). Without checking other sources, readers are not often aware they aren't getting the whole story, and as a result they unwittingly share information that isn't the whole truth. Partisan media also often attacks the credibility of experts, creating audience confusion about the validity of evidence (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 142-143). This problem is faced by issues like climate change where empirical evidence is called into question and the authority of scientists is invalidated with the intent of supporting partisan rhetoric.

II. Why Social Media is Conducive to Spread of False and Misleading Information

False and misleading information is by no means limited to social media and is a problem that has plagued traditional media since its inception. However, the scale at which misinformation is being produced and shared has seen a drastic increase since the invention and popularization of social media platforms. What is it about social media in particular that makes it so conducive to the production and spread of false and misleading information? The inherently social nature of the platform feeds certain human psycho-social behaviors, including rational social decision making and community-based polarization tendencies that are aligned with the many ways misinformation is spread online. These psycho-social behaviors are amplified by social media's algorithmic filtering, creating a phenomenon known as the echo chamber or filter bubble. The filter bubble facilitates cognitive bias and partisan selective exposure that further exacerbates the production and proliferation of false and misleading information.

a. Psycho-social Behaviors Amplified by Social Media

Western thought holds that humans are essentially rational beings, and that any failures to make well-informed decisions are the result of faulty reasoning (O'Connor 2019, 14). This is a distorted idea that emphasizes a disconnect between individual and group level behaviors and fails to capture the ways in which humans learn from their social networks. Psychological research suggests that humans form their beliefs more on the basis of what other people say and believe than we think (O'Connor 2019, 8). This is impacted in part by a well-documented phenomenon known as conformity bias, in which individuals will often choose to go against presented evidence in order to conform to the behaviors and expressed beliefs of others (O'Connor 2019, 81). This concept was famously demonstrated in the Asch Conformity Experiment, in which individuals were asked to identify which of a set of three lines was the

same size as a presented sample line (Blake and Mouton 1961, 4). The subject had no knowledge that the other participants were in on the experiment, and thus often adjusted their answers against their immediate judgement when the rest of the group gave deliberately false answers. While not all subjects conformed to the group consensus, they were three times as likely to conform to the group consensus in the absence of other dissenting opinions (Van den Bos et al. 2015, 1). This experiment illustrated how powerful the consensus of the group can be when determining one's own beliefs. Even when individuals choose to go against the judgements of others, it is uncomfortable and can lead to negative social effects like ostracization or estrangement (O'Connor 2019, 84). Social media platforms facilitate building and interacting with communities online, which can have strong influences on the way individuals perceive information that they initially may believe to be false or misleading. These beliefs can easily spread through these hyper-connected communities despite strong contrary evidence (O'Connor 2019, 82). Even without strong pressures to conform, individuals may still make seemingly irrational judgements about the validity of a piece of information. This is a phenomenon known as the information cascade, which is different from conformity bias in that individuals are not actively trying to fit in with a group, but rather are making rational decisions based on evidence presented to them (Bikchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch 1992, 994). These rational decisions are based on the belief that the person sharing a piece of information has some prior knowledge of its validity no matter how outwardly ludicrous, and that conforming to this information seems like a good idea because others may have information we lack. Each individual in this cascading chain of belief perceives their behavior as rational, which can over time cause a whole group or community to behave in ways that seem irrational from an outside perspective. The way information is passed from person to person on social media, often from individuals that are

perceived as knowledgeable or trustworthy, facilitates the development of these information cascades that can rapidly spread misinformation no matter how illogical it may seem from an outside perspective.

Desire for interpersonal connection, influenced by a need for conformity and other social behaviors, has created significant polarization in online communities. The desire for connection and identity within group contexts is a deeply ingrained instinctual human behavior, and as a result most will seek it out either in their daily lives, online, or both. An individual's communal identity often transcends interpersonal associations, and social group categorization is very important to establishing one's group identity (Slater 2007, 291). Social media has increased the salience of group identity by allowing people to feel more connected to others than ever before (Slater 2007, 291). Disparate individuals from across the globe can be connected in seconds and can discuss similar interests or news in online communities they are a part of (Lee and Ma 2012, 332). When communities are built by seeking out individuals with similar interests or values, this behavior naturally results in the formation of in-groups and out-groups. When community groups are ideologically separated, those within them are more likely to read content that is aligned with their own ideological positions (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 230). On social media, this has created what has been called reinforcing spirals or feedback loops. In these reinforcing spirals, media influences the beliefs or behaviors of an individual, and as a result, that individual is more likely to seek out similar communities and information (Slater 2007, 291). Misinformation that makes its way into these spirals is perpetuated amongst these in-groups in a way that may not otherwise occur. The usual moderating influences on media consumption, such as familial pressures or internalization of values from other sources, are largely absent in social media news consumption (Slater 2007, 289). These in-groups are also then responsible for spreading said

misinformation to others in an effort to reach out to those who may be interested in joining the community of like-minded individuals.

Conformity bias, information cascades, and reinforcing spirals have all contributed to the most prevalent psycho-social behavior observed in politically minded social media: partisan-motivated reasoning. In discussions or explorations of news on political subjects, individuals are more likely to believe information that is congruent with their pre-existing beliefs or party affiliations (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 147). There is also an observed tendency for individuals to perceive arguments that go against their prior attitudes about a particular subject to be less compelling (Ardevol-Abreu, Delponti, and Rodriguez-Wanguemert 2020, 4). Such partisan-motivated reasoning dramatically increases the susceptibility of these individuals to misinformation on social media (Bode et al. 2015, 621). They are likely to ignore information or evidence contrary to their beliefs, and are less careful with what they choose to share when they do not expect to be challenged by their peers (Chadwick, Vaccari, and O’Loughlin 2018, 4260). These reinforcing and exclusionary behaviors have created increasingly polarized community networks where misinformation can thrive.

b. Echo Chamber or Filter Bubble Effect

The primary result of these psycho-social behaviors when combined with algorithmic filtering on social media platforms has been the echo chamber effect, also known as the filter bubble, which has polarized shared news media and limited individual’s exposure to diversity of thought. When partisan-motivated reasoning is combined with social media’s algorithmic filtering, people engage in confirmation bias and will look for information closest to what they already believe. These “cognitive misers” seek out information in the quickest and easiest way

possible (Valenzuela et al. 2019, 805). To resist cognitive dissonance, they will actively look for information confirming their beliefs and will disregard all other information to the contrary (Gordon-Murnane 2012, 113-114). This is aided by algorithms filtering information visible to users by their interests, preferences, and habitual behaviors (Bruns 2019, 2).

Partisan selective exposure resulting from confirmation bias, partisan-motivated reasoning, and selective filtering by algorithms significantly proliferates misinformation on social media. As established, people are more likely to trust information from within their in-groups (Southwell, Thorson, and Sheble 2018, 143). Politically engaged individuals, and those most prone to partisan-motivated reasoning, are up to 15% more likely to unquestioningly trust information from their in-group (Valenzuela et al. 2019, 806). Sharing political information encourages the formation of closed groups where misinformation is more likely to be transmitted, a result of the reinforcing spiral phenomenon (Valenzuela et al. 2019, 806). Exacerbated by algorithms, partisan selective exposure reveals the extent to which internet technology can serve to narrow rather than to widen user's political horizons (Iyengar and Hahn 2009, 34). Generally, research finds that nearly a quarter of consumers almost exclusively use news sources that share their political views (Metzger, Hartsell, and Flanagin 2020, 4). The Pew Research Center, reporting on US media usage in 2020, illuminates the ways partisan selective exposure has grown and intensified over time, particularly in conservative circles (Mitchell et al. 2021). "24% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents turned only to sources with right-leaning audiences... and 25% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents chose only outlets with left-leaning audiences" (Mitchell et al. 2021, 6). Among these groups, the Democrats tended to rely on a mix of sources while Republicans tended to rely on just two or three. As a result, and especially in relation to the 2020 presidential election, Republicans were

more likely to be exposed to and believe false or misleading information (Mitchell et al. 2021, 26).

III. Conclusion and Proposed Recommendations

As a direct result of social media, the spread of misinformation has reached an unprecedented scale with significant ramifications for the conduct of democratic institutions and societies. Social media's conductivity to misinformation online resulting from its design to feed certain psycho-social behaviors, bolstered by algorithmic structures, poses a significant challenge to efforts aiming to combat its spread. Promising proposed strategies tackle the issue on multiple levels. Vast amounts of information and lack of context cues on social media makes the process of determining the validity of information difficult for users. Implementation of a system of verification for trustworthy or untrustworthy sources, along with developing task forces (either human or AI) to recognize and verify said information, would assist users in making judgements about the value of the information they are consuming (Southwell 2018). The algorithms of social media platforms is another area where promising solutions have been proposed. Tweaking the algorithm to expose users to a wider variety of information could combat the tendency of algorithms to perpetuate echo chambers and partisan selective exposure (O'Connor 2019). Investing in combating misinformation online will ensure the ability of democratic institutions to continue to function and reinforce trust in the socio-political systems governing global systems.

Chapter Two: Unearthing Causes of Distrust in the Media Around the World

By Thomas Adrian

Distrust in the Media Around the World

A longitudinal survey of trust in news media by Gallup shows a consistent decline in trust in conventional media institutions such as newspapers and television news. In 2007, 48% of American respondents said they have some degree of confidence in newspapers (Gallup, 2007). By the same category, in 2020, only 36% of respondents claim to have the same degree of confidence in newspapers—a significant drop in people who placed trust in the news media. For cable television news in the same year, the respondents are 40% and 33%, respectively. The numbers are even lower for those who profess "quite a lot" and a "great deal" of confidence in the news media. Another survey on trust in mass media across different age groups in 2016 indicates that older Americans (38%) are more likely than younger Americans (26%) to express trust and confidence in mass media (Gallup, 2016). These findings suggest that people trust the news media much less than they used to, especially among conservative Republicans (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). According to a 2018 report by the Knight Foundation, conservative Republicans are more likely than Democrats to cite inaccuracy and bias as the primary concern for their lack of trust in the news media. Another competing factor that drives distrust in the media is a lack of transparency: 71% say that a commitment to transparency is essential, followed closely by providing fact-checking resources and links to research and facts that back up its reporting (The Knight Foundation, 2018).

While distrust in the press is not a new phenomenon—eminent twentieth-century political figures like Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon having previously considered the media to be "the enemy"—populist leaders in imperfect democracies today have invented a new set of economic, legal, and extralegal apparatuses to silence critical journalism and promote

sympathetic news outlets. As president, Donald Trump repeatedly demonized the media as "absolute scum" and "among the most dishonest human beings on Earth" and denounced news organizations as "fake news" (Davis and Rosenberg, 2017). In Hungary, President Viktor Orbán has also explicitly referred to Hungary's most-read online news site, Index.hu, as "fake news" (Repucci, 2019). In advanced industrial countries and developing countries, political leaders use political misinformation and conspiracy theories in the mainstream press and social media to debilitate independent press for personal and political gain. In the United Kingdom and Gibraltar, the 2016 Brexit referendum prevailed based on a misinformation campaign (The Economist, 2016). In Europe, Poland's ultranationalist party disseminated debunked conspiracies between Poland's post-communist leaders and the communist regime to rule the country together (ibid.). In Turkey, the protests at Gezi Park in 2013 and an attempted coup have given rise to all kinds of conspiracy theories, some touted by government officials. Under the presidency of Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government has developed a series of media policies that would almost completely repress the media, including consolidating media ownership at the hands of his cronies (Repucci, 2019).

This overarching trend weakens the media and other institutions that uphold democratic freedom, giving rise to authoritarianism that has an enormous potential to put national security at risk and destabilize the post-World War II political order. Globalization, the hallmark of that post-World War II liberal order, is under attack by the same forces that precipitate distrust in the media worldwide.

Globalization and Economic Dislocations

Globalization provides a valuable systematic context to understanding how the advent of populism in the United States and elsewhere elevated the use of political misinformation and conspiracy theories for political gain. Globalization refers to the flow of goods, services, capital, people, cultures, and ideas across borders (Stiglitz, 2018). For the last two decades, advanced democracies worldwide have expressed their antipathy to globalization more explicitly under a warranted belief that it has brought new grievances in the developed world (ibid.). The catalyst to the backlash against globalization was the 2008 financial crisis, which catastrophically disrupted the global economic order and inflicted enormous insecurity to hundreds of millions worldwide. The mismanagement of trade globalization by the United States and other advanced countries has contributed to growing domestic income inequality exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis. In the United States, income inequality is driven almost exclusively by the top 0.1 percent of the people, up from 7 percent in 1979 to 22 percent in 2012 (Saez and Zucman, 2016). As middle-class wages stagnated and job losses became widespread, resentment towards the liberal meritocratic globalization from middle-class populations in advanced countries piled up, creating a new power vacuum from which populist leaders consolidated their power.

The intense hostility and distrust towards globalization are born out of a perceived sense of failure from the governing establishment to protect the welfare of its citizens (Haass, 2020). The collapse of the global market economy in 2008—and once again in 2020 due to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic—shows that business firms do not necessarily operate under the assumption of trickle-down economics, an economic proposition that lowering corporate income taxes and promoting deregulation will make society at large better off. It shows how the markets are not necessarily competitive and that the outcomes promised by advocates of

globalization benefit corporations more than everyday people (Stiglitz, 2018). In this form, globalization ends up leaving too many people out of the equation, serving only those at the top and leaving the people on the backbone of economic activity worse off. As income inequality rises, disaffected citizens might choose to support populist leaders who speak to their hardships, allowing them to capture the market share of electorates and build their political influence around anti-establishment discontent and facts that harmonize their worldview.

Understanding the economic roots of right-wing populism helps put into perspective how distrust in the media and other independent institutions more broadly feeds a dangerous rise in political misinformation and conspiracy theories. Although right-wing populism is often characterized as a matter of identity and political values, economic dislocations contribute to populism because they reinforce the favorable conditions necessary for its survival. Socioeconomic discontent, ineffective government, and a lack of social trust are some of the prerequisite conditions that perpetuate the culture of grievances almost synonymous with right-wing populism, which demagogues can continuously leverage to gain votes and strengthen their base. All of these problems combined have tremendous ramifications on whether countries can solve the more complex and nuanced challenges such as cynicism and political polarization, both of which are corrosive to democratic freedom and the state of the media at large.

Poor Institutional Performance and Political Polarization

Political polarization ranks high among one of the most harmful indicators of distrust in the media. Political polarization contributes to the increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data and the blurring of the line between opinion and fact by creating an illusion of extreme polarities between people who hold different political beliefs.

As each side comes up with their crystallized narrative, worldview, and facts, the public sphere becomes hostile, preventing discourse from reaching a compromise and agreement (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018). This polarized climate can also make people less likely to be willing to relinquish their exclusive truth claims and be open to different points of view. Research suggests that this phenomenon leads to a fragmentation in the body politic where each person may live hermetically siloed realities, especially for those who identify as social media users (The Aspen Institute, 2019).

In the United States, where the effects of political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization are more pronounced and concerning, polarization creates an interplay between party divides and distrust in the media. With respect to trust and misinformation, right-leaning supporters of right-leaning politicians are more likely to blame journalists and the media for spreading harmful misinformation than politicians' behavior (Newman et al., 2020). This finding echoed the rhetoric that former President Donald Trump had leveled against the media throughout his presidency. On the other hand, left-leaning people are rather much more likely to attribute the spread of misinformation to politicians' behavior than journalists and the media (ibid.). On an individual and collective level, the rampant spread of political misinformation caused by a polarized society lends itself to creating an increasingly isolated electorate that is more susceptible to disinformation and conspiracy thinking (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018). While research suggests that people at both extremes of the political spectrum are more prone to conspiracy thinking than their moderate counterparts, a study by University of Oxford social psychologist Sander van der Linden shows that conservatives tended to be more susceptible than liberals in their thinking, as conservatives tend to focus on managing the threat of uncertainty and in-group values (Miller, 2021). Voters who perceive a great deal of alienation are thus less

likely to believe in facts published by the media and participate in civic matters, diluting civil discourse and the electoral process.

On a national level, a divided democratic government held captive by cynicism, intolerance, and vanishing social contract faces delays in political appointments, lapses in oversight and investigative tasks, and a debilitating inability to reach fiscal consensus. The presence of this chasm encourages right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, Viktor Orbán, and Nicholas Maduro to coalesce around an idealized form of government that only works through their autocratic power. Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations, argues that populists can present additional roadblocks for reform-minded politicians long after leaving the office (Kurlantzick, 2021). They may discredit the democratic process that brought victory to their opposition, embolden other populists to evangelize for their cause, and further divide the masses.

Finding Clarity in Disruptive Change

For the past few years, democracies around the world have been building to a truth crisis. The rapid spread of political misinformation and conspiracy theories erodes public trust and confidence in independent institutions critical to democratic governance. A polarized society fed with fake news and cynicism poses significant challenges to the media because they do considerable harm to press freedom and disintegrate social cohesion. The rise of conspiracy-peddling right-wing populism, which has its roots deep within significant economic dislocations and sociopolitical polarization, influences the way people interpret their understanding of truth and reality. A deluge of irrelevant information and an increasingly distrustful public yields very little clarity on a nation's identity and direction to where they are going as a people. In a rapidly

changing world, the Fourth Estate's role has never been more vital, as it provides society with the information necessary to hold government officials accountable. As the gatekeepers of truth, the media can help guide society in navigating the new global challenges of the 21st century, including climate change, artificial intelligence, fear of automation, and infectious diseases.

Restoring public trust in the media and other independent institutions requires a combination of robust economic reform and civic education. The disappearance of good jobs, the diminishing role of facts and the social contract in public life have led to political paralysis, erosion in civil discourse, and pervasive uncertainty (RAND Corporation, 2020). When people cannot agree on what constitutes basic facts, they cannot begin to address today's most severe challenges. Increasing civic education would mean preparing children and youth with the essential intelligence, skills, and qualities to interact with life in the republic. Building on the framework that the RAND Corporation has already provided, this Task Force recommends policymakers and stakeholders identify and find ways to reduce inequities in civic learning opportunities across schools that host vulnerable, underserved student communities (Hamilton et al., 2020). The Task Force recommends equipping teachers, especially at the elementary level, with the training, funding, and cross-functional opportunities that promote civic development, including activities that invite civic intelligence, deep thinking, moral imagination, and social courage. Renewing interest in civics in early education and incorporating civics in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education is important, given that there is often a wide knowledge gap between those who study STEM and their ability to interact with the real world. Furthermore, this Task Force underscores the importance of adopting new strategies for educators to teach media literacy to counter cynicism, distrust, and political polarization. Research finds that teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach students to navigate

fake news and to navigate it themselves (Ranschaert, 2020). Therefore, supporting teachers' efforts to teach media literacy is crucial to countering distrust and political misinformation in global media.

Chapter Three: News Media as a Tool Facilitating the Spread of Propaganda

By Luqi Liu

Modern technology has brought news coverage to a new level in terms of speed, depth, and breadth. Despite how profuse the media landscape is, people still often comply with ideas or knowledge that they previously held as they become unwilling to accept other perspectives. This new phenomenon is attributed to the increasing presence of propaganda in media—traditional news media, not just social media.

Propaganda is defined as information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a political case or point of view. Most times, propaganda is spread through media coverage. Propaganda has seeped into most aspects of daily life as its spread is no longer limited to the far reaches of media, but instead spread by all individuals and organizations who have a clear agenda to get across. Topics that face scrutiny include elections, human rights issues, climate change, and personal health. These issues, which some people already find difficult to understand, allow for spreaders of propaganda to influence the public by pushing misinformation and conspiracy theories.

As the main outlet of disseminating information, news media quickly became the vehicle for propagandists to advance their own cynical interests against the public good, oftentimes through a subtle manipulation of the norms in modern journalism. They usually do so by exploiting the neutrality of news media, the inherent trustworthiness granted to traditional media, and the problematic business model media companies operate on. As a result, news media has facilitated the spread of misleading information, though at times unwittingly, by speeding up the rate of dissemination and reducing the standards of what stories are published.

Neutrality of News Media

Most democratic societies have a news media that plays a vital role in providing the public well sourced articles that are informative and accurate. Journalism is designed to be independent of any one specific sector, and to provide as much diverse information as is possible. Following this logic, the Fairness Doctrine, implemented in the U.S by the Federal Communication Commission from 1949 to 1987 to regulate broadcasts, asked that journalism within the states promote coverage that represented all sides of a debate (Stefon 2018). Even though this doctrine was revoked due to its potential of infringing the First Amendment right on content moderation (Matthews 2011), the legacy of reporting all perspectives of public-interest topics has remained the standard ethical code for journalists to practice.

In order to spread propaganda, bad actors use this standard ethical code to ensure their side of an argument is represented, even if it is not true or based on factual evidence. For example, former US president Donald Trump was notorious for harassing the media and forcing them to cover the wild theories he laid out in his tweets and public appearances (Benkler et al. 2020). The three core standards he used to disseminate disinformation, especially during the 2020 election and his recent claims of voter fraud, were “elite institutional focus; headline seeking; and balance, neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side” (Benkler et al. 2020). This chapter will explain the first two in the later sections, but promoting “fairness” in journalistic reporting is the most relevant point, since the majority of his audiences “are not politically pre-committed and have relatively low political knowledge confused, because it limits the degree to which professional journalists in mass media organizations are willing or able to directly call the voter fraud frame disinformation” (Benkler et al. 2020). Avoiding covering the disinformation spread by Trump was difficult for journalists and hosts as they tried to generate a neutral summary of the events after the 2020 elections.

Since journalists are asked to give all sides equal airtime and provide a comprehensive summary of all information, they always fall into the trap of working to cover less exposed stories. This means that smaller groups, like anti-vaccine activists and others who hold an ideology different from the mainstream, have access to traditional media as an outlet for their ideas as journalists strive to cover all points of view on any given topic.

While it is good to have as many perspectives as possible to ensure fair media coverage, it is important for journalists and media companies to differentiate between, say, political opinions and inaccurate facts.

Building Communities Within the News Media

There is no unified definition of what public-interest topics are, and so the decision of what to cover is usually left to the journalists or media organizations who report the news (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019). Often, these groups can be easily biased by their own ideologies and what they have observed while working on a story, even if they work not to be, and their ideas may be further influenced by misinformation. The existing news environment in the United States is a good example of how partisan politics has shaped news coverage on large media platforms (“‘Fake News,’ Lies and Propaganda: How to Sort Fact from Fiction: Where Do News Sources Fall on the Political Bias Spectrum?” 2021). It is worth mentioning that there is no clear measure on the partisan bias of the news media, for the data is collected by comparing articles from different sites or through internal and external surveys, of which personal bias is a variable. Groups who wish to spread political propaganda hold enough power to influence the content published by media platforms, thus leading to media platforms playing a large role in the dissemination of misinformation.

Rather than using his campaign team to spread the conspiracy of mail-in voting and vote fraud, Donald Trump and his team aligned with right-wing news outlets like Fox News and the Republican National Committee. He and his team made constant appearances on the show. His strategy formed a kind of right-wing press circuit that worked to “reinforce the message, provide the president a platform, and marginalize or attack those Republican leaders or any conservative media personalities who insist that there is no evidence of widespread voter fraud associated with mail-in voting” (Benkler et al. 2020).

There is an interaction between news sites and their subscribers. There is not clear evidence of whether the bias of the platforms attract more readers and viewers with the same ideology, or if the accumulation of individuals with the same bias has pushed the sites to evolve towards a certain side of the political spectrum. Either way, these biases have helped shape different platforms into trusted sources, since audiences are more comfortable with the preferences displayed in the contents published by different media organizations. This infrastructure allows propagandists to spread their messages in a community that already favors their ideas. The advantage of this existing community within the media is that it not only helps with the speed that claims spread, whether they be true or misleading, but it also affects how far a message can spread. The message is amplified with the dissemination, and the community it reaches accepts it more and more as it continues to spread. Politicians can easily build up their support by endorsing extreme advocates and persuading those on the other side all at the same time.

Trustworthiness of News Media

The main reasons traditional news media remains the most credible source for news consumption is their practice of good faith behavior and their attempts to bring truthful information to the general public. Unlike social media, a majority of which are run by private companies in the US and safe from liability of the contents created and shared on their platforms because of Section 230 (“Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act” n.d.), news media serves as the traditional channel for disseminating information by producing its own stories. They have a heavy burden of constantly fact-checking the source of their articles or programs, because they are responsible for all produced materials, and feel the pressure of keeping a reputation of credibility.

Due to its history of credibility, news media is still the top choice for people seeking out information, despite emerging evidence suggesting a decline of trust in media (“Media Use and Evaluation” 2020). When it comes to controversial topics, like climate change or the current global pandemic and the associated concerns about the vaccine, the public turns to traditional media as a credible source. A study shows that television and digital formats of major news outlets are the top two sources that the people across the 40 global markets surveyed used for learning more about climate change (Andi 2020). The massive influence media has on the public is good for propagandists to push their agendas within the articles published on those platforms.

Striving to cover stories with credible sources can blind journalists from detecting the real intent behind sources. Though it may seem like journalists report on new studies or research done by scientists, the studies may be funded by people who wish to find evidence to support a specific narrative. While some studies present small inaccuracies, others support conspiracies and larger misinformation campaigns, creating confusion and mistrust of scientific research. People who wish to spread a certain narrative step in to directly fund specific groups of

scientists, or request research that will generate predetermined results, allowing for easier manipulation of information (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019).

Health concerns are a common topic in the news, and a field that requires a significant amount of scientific expertise. Despite many studies done in the past, topics like the dangers of smoking long remained in dispute. Smoking causes health concerns ranging from minor symptoms like trouble breathing to severe chronic diseases such as lung cancer on both the smoker, and people who inhaled enough smoke from association. In the 1950s, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) in the U.S. claimed they were going to provide assistance to studies about the connection between tobacco use and health issues, lung cancer in particular. However, they promoted scientific research that contradicted the growing consensus against smoking at the time. TIRC was formed to support the tobacco industry by addressing the public's concerns about the detrimental effects of smoking, and the institution was run and supported by tobacco companies. It is difficult to ignore this connection between the TIRC and profit-driven tobacco companies, since the latter has a large influence on how monetary assistance is doled out to scientific research. TIRC was able to use scientific evidence to support their claims and reduce public concern over the possible health effects of smoking, which increases sales of tobacco over the following years (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019). In this case, propaganda was successful at manipulating public opinion.

Why did their efforts turn out to be so effective and successful? In addition to manipulating scientific evidence, having a connection with the media is a major tactic employed by propagandists. Journalists serve as a middle man between sometimes difficult to understand scientific studies and the general public. When a new scientific study catches the attention of a propagandist, they are able to use their ties to major media companies to disseminate the finding

to the public (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019). Since the results are coming from a credible entity backed up with scientific evidence, journalists are more willing to publish directly from what they get without paying much attention to how the results are gathered and frequently ignore the fact that the result usually comes from a single study that might have a bias or be incomplete. A similar strategy was used by Donald Trump as he was exploiting one of the core standards of journalism: elite institutional focus (Benkler et al. 2020). The notion is quite simple: information released by the President or his office will always make the news, whether or not the claims are credible.

Being responsible for what one says and ensuring its credibility is a basic rule of thumb for rational individuals. This rule should also be applied to journalism. However, as much as normal citizens sometimes state inaccuracies, so do journalists. Those who wish to spread misinformation are waiting for these cracks in accuracy, and use them to spread their ideas, building off already present false information.

Capitalized News Media

Media companies have fallen into a business model where they compete for readership against other media companies in the industry, along with the news spread on social media. A technique frequently used by media companies is to constantly generate eye-catching news coverage to entice readers, and the subsequent ad revenue often increases the spread of misleading information.

Recently, there has been enormous pressure placed on journalists to write attention grabbing pieces and cover new or surprising scientific research, which garners readership, but is not always the most truthful form of media. Take the case of Trump's claims of voter fraud again. His team targeted journalist's need to gain and hold readers' attention and emitted a stream

of constant, shocking information—the kind of information where the headline almost writes itself (Benkler et al. 2020). Such content may be controversial or misleading, but it is effective enough to drive views and discussion on the platform. A trend of reporting existing claims or findings is prevalent among journalists as a way to generate attractive stories that would help increase readership. People are always interested in things that surprise them and challenge their beliefs even though they may not agree with them. This also applies to people’s consumption of news. In order to trigger this tendency, journalists have brought back stale news items and given them a second life. Since not everyone had been exposed to these false statements before, journalists could bring the claims back as new and exciting. Such action reminds the public of misleading information and could potentially amplify inaccuracies among those who hadn't heard them before.

Competition can motivate journalists to cover as many stories as possible with various perspectives and encourage them to find innovative ways to report them, but it simultaneously creates a loophole when the priority is speed, rather than accuracy. Reports on a single-study story or stories they get from “credible” sources, usually entities with a specific purpose, are examples of how journalists can spread misleading information. The result from a single study can be misleading, but reporters do not have time to check the bias of the research or wait for comprehensive study results. Even if they do, their competitors or readers may not. This gives them an excuse to produce a series of subsequent articles to correct the result in the previous articles, which boosts the volume of articles published and keeps readers coming back for more. Covering live events is the most challenging task for journalism to manage while staying on top of fact-checking. The nature of live events does not allow journalists to predict what is coming and limits their ability to go through the proper fact-checking process. They have minimum

control over the content and are just airing or reporting whatever is happening. This could be problematic when hosting live events, “like Trump’s November 5 press conference, where lies and falsehoods were being repeated at a dangerous level” (Wardle 2021).

Speed reporting has another side-effect, as investigative stories take a back seat to breaking news. Investigative stories are time and money consuming projects, and they receive less attention from readers and less funding from media companies. These stories do not hold the reader’s interest as well as breaking news, and so do not necessarily generate enough financial revenue from subscriptions and advertising to be sustainable. Similarly, more investigation-driven local news companies with a focus on community have been crowded out by major media companies. These local companies are usually less efficient at producing constant news, and readership is limited by the size of the community. However, local news outlets serve a vital role in communicating information about events in the community (Andi 2020). For example, local scholars and experts can analyze how the proposed policies made by candidates could affect specific communities during the election season, or how climate change is affecting people differently across the U.S. It can also serve as a tool to unravel the true intent of the disinformation campaign through deep investigations. With the absence of investigative reporting and local news media, people from smaller, more isolated communities can easily fall for misinformation spread by propagandists.

News media is run by people and motivated by financial interests, meaning ethical codes of conduct are not enough to overcome subtle manipulation and misinformation. As the media landscape transforms into a more complex industrial system, it becomes more difficult to uphold good journalistic practices. Unfortunately, propagandists take advantage of the norms held by journalists, and enable a constant supply of stories that support their polarizing ideologies.

In order to immunize the public from the manipulation via misinformation, changes and improvements must first be made in the journalism industry, with increased transparency and caution when selecting what content is covered. Some possible actions include increasing funding for sustainable reporting, implementing a stricter evaluation process for news coverage, requesting the help of professional committees for strengthening the code of conduct of journalism and over-seeing the influence of propaganda on the news, and evaluating efforts from individual activists on promoting a neutral platform for news consumption. Holding media companies accountable for the presence of propagandists is already challenging, but difficulties keep growing as media evolves to be more digital, and the job for disseminating information has become detached from the traditional mass media.

Chapter Four: Manipulation Through Misinformation: A Case Study of Facebook

By Karina Mendoza and Sanjana Potnis

Introduction

The increased spread of misinformation on online platforms has brought into question the role of private tech companies and their responsibility for monitoring the activities of users and curbing misinformation. There is heightened concern regarding Facebook—the global social media platform used by nearly 2.2 billion people—and its users, many of whom use the platform to acquire news and information that informs their worldview. In the final three months of the 2016 US presidential election, it was reported that the top-performing fake election news stories generated on Facebook had garnered more engagement than the top news stories from major outlets, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News, and more (Silverman 2016). The 20 top-performing false election stories from hyperpartisan blogs and hoax sites generated nearly 9 million shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook during the last and most crucial months of the presidential race (Silverman 2016). Additionally, advertising companies associated with political campaigns and action committees utilized digital advertising campaigns to strategically counteract the news and happenings of campaigns to strongly influence the narrative to targeted audiences (Silverman 2016). The proliferation of misinformation and strategic manipulation of users on the platform presents a danger to users and society as a whole. Research has also found that low barriers of publication and lenient monitoring practices by Facebook have also led to a polarizing climate promoting online radicalization on the platform as social media usage enhances the spread of extremist ideology, suggesting that online and physical organizing remain primary recruitment tools of the far-right movement (Jenson 2018).

In this chapter we examine the role Facebook has played in enabling the access of 3rd party companies to spread disinformation and facilitate user manipulation via advertising, as well as its low barriers to publication, lenient monitoring practices, and problematic algorithms. Additionally, we will assess the substantial consequences of the polarization in ideologies that have emerged through the rapid spread of misinformation on the platform. Our chapter concludes that Facebook's policies regarding advertisement, data access, and content monitoring, in addition to its general lack of transparency and accountability, have brought about a misuse of its influence and power, promoting online radicalization, manipulation of users, and real world shifts in the socio-political landscape. Our analysis reveals the necessity for accountability and transparency regarding Facebook's actions and will demonstrate the need for developing policies that recalibrate the platform to avoid polarization and manipulation of its users and society.

The Politics of 3rd Party Advertising & User Data

a. The Problem with Data Harvesting

In 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg stated, "We do not sell data to advertisers," when he testified during a Senate hearing. "What we allow is for advertisers to tell us who they want to reach," Zuckerberg said. "And then we do the placement." While it is true that Facebook does not sell users' data directly to third parties, it is also true that the company clearly profits from its users' information. Advertising accounts for Facebook's primary source of revenue, as the company secured \$40 billion in advertising revenue in 2017 due to user data, remaining second only to Google in regards to the share of the global digital advertising market (Anderson 2018). Facebook itself uses the data users provide combined with geographic information to tailor different advertising to a certain audience or demographic. While Facebook may not exactly be "selling" user's data it certainly "sells access" to it in order to allow advertisers to

tailor their ads to reach certain demographics (Leetaru 2018). In regards to 3rd-party companies, Facebook does not sell data but rather gives it away for free—a situation for which the consequences were made most apparent during the 2018 ‘Cambridge Analytica scandal’ (Anderson 2018).

Facebook came under fire after it was revealed by a whistleblower in early 2018 that for years Facebook gave personal data from upwards of 87 million Facebook users to the UK-based political data-analytics firm Cambridge Analytica (Dance et al. 2018). Cambridge Analytica harvested personal information on where users lived and what pages they liked, which built psychological profiles that analyzed characteristics and personality traits. This information became instrumental in assisting political campaigns, as Cambridge Analytica was hired by various campaigns in the U.S. and U.K (Ma and Gilbert 2019). The targeting of U.S. and U.K. voters on social media ahead of the 2016 U.S. elections and Brexit referendum is a part of a broader phenomenon pushed by political groups to use digital political campaigning via 3rd-party data harvesting to target people on social media with sophisticated messaging. In late 2018, a New York Times investigative report also found that the social network shared access to users' data with over 500 other tech firms, including Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix, Spotify, and Yandex (Dance et al. 2018). The revelations in the report detailed a series of scandals including the Cambridge Analytica data harvest, incitement to violence in Myanmar, evidence of Russian and Iranian meddling in the US elections, and several data-exposing bugs (Dance et al. 2018). The evidence found has been highly concerning, because it reveals how Facebook has enabled 3rd party advertising companies to work alongside political campaigns and action committees to utilize primarily fear-based digital advertising on its platform. This advertising often works to strategically counteract the news of current political events and campaigns, to strongly influence

narratives to targeted audiences, and to influence voters and society as a whole (Silverman 2018). This brings into question the role of private tech companies (in this case, specifically Facebook) and the level of control they wield over user's personal data, and also brings to light the responsibility they hold for the spread of misinformation and manipulation of users on their social media sites.

b. Cambridge Analytica & User Data

Cambridge Analytica was founded in 2012 as a subsidiary of the private intelligence company and self-described "global election management agency" known as the SCL Group by wealthy individuals with close ties to the UK Conservative Party, the British royal family and British military (DCMSC 2019). The company's largest donor and shareholder was the wealthy conservative US billionaire and Donald Trump donor Robert Mercer, and the company received the backing of Stephen Bannon, the previous chief executive of Donald Trump's election campaign who also later served as the Vice President of Cambridge Analytica (DCMSC 2019). Stephen Bannon was brought in with the promise of tools that could identify the personalities of American voters and subsequently influence their behavior (Rosenberg 2018). The firm needed data to accomplish this mission; Bannon was intrigued by the possibility of using personality profiling to "shift America's culture" and "rewire its politics," as recalled by former employees of the firm (Rosenberg 2018). This required the building of psychographic profiles of individuals on a national scale. Psychographics is a qualitative methodology used to describe psychological traits of humans, which is often used in market segmentation as well as in advertising (Wells 1975). Psychographic research focuses on cognitive attributes such as attitudes, interests, opinions, and belief, factors which would be able to provide information such as whether a user was a 'neurotic introvert,' a 'religious extrovert,' a 'fan of the occult,' and so on (Wells 1975;

Rosenberg 2018). This approach of psychological analysis essentially allows them to identify issues people might support and how to position arguments to them. For example, it helps determine how to persuade American voters on the importance of the second amendment, which guarantees the right to keep and bear arms. For example, advertising could play on the fears of someone who would be easily frightened into believing they need the right to have a gun to protect their home from intruders (DCMSC 2019). In order to access such deeply personal information on the psychological traits of an individual to develop a uniquely powerful means of designing political messages, the firm turned to Facebook, the tech company which held the extraordinary power of wielding the private information and social media habits of its over 2.2 billion users (Rosenberg 2018).

The researcher hired by Cambridge Analytica was the Russian-American scientist Alexandr Kogan, who told Facebook in 2013 that he was collecting the information for solely ‘academic purposes’ and not for a political data firm owned by a wealthy conservative (Rosenberg 2018). Facebook notably did nothing to verify Kogan’s claim on how he was utilizing the private user information and granted him free access to the user data (Rosenberg 2018). With full access to the user data of millions of Facebook users, Cambridge Analytica was able to utilize psychographics to predict people’s personality scores. Creating trait predictions based on information such as Facebook likes, the computer-generated personality scores of users had the potential to be “more accurate than even the knowledge of very close friends and family members” (DCMSC 2019). The company utilized a software called the Ripon tool, developed by the Canadian digital advertising and software company Aggregate IQ (AIQ), to assist in analysis of data. Cambridge Analytica initially tested this tool in Trinidad and Tobago’s elections in 2014, where they popularized the “Do So” campaign and worked to “increase apathy” and make

it “cool and popular” among Afro-Caribbean youth to get out and “not vote” (Goodman 2020). The Do So campaign effectively turned the elections and led to a win by the Indo-Caribbean vote for the Indian political party that had hired the company (Goodman 2020). By using different countries in the Global South with notably less regulation as “petri dishes,” the firm was able to fine-tune different tactics and eventually sell them for a higher cost in larger or Western democracies with larger multi-million election budgets (Goodman 2020). Cambridge Analytica's executives stated in 2018 that the company had worked in more than 200 elections around the world, including in India, Pakistan, Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia, Cyprus, Zambia, South Africa, Romania, Italy, Lithuania, Nigeria, the Philippines, Kenya, Malaysia, Brazil, and more (Ghoshal 2018). The election business and the “global influence industry” which Cambridge Analytica was a part of has become a “multibillion-dollar global business” (Goodman 2020).

c. Case Studies: U.S. and U.K.

In the U.S, Facebook data would later be scraped in order to support political campaigns across 11 states in the 2014 midterm elections. Afterward, Cambridge Analytica reported there was a 39% increase in awareness of issues featured in the campaign’s advertising amongst those who had received targeted messages, and claimed their campaign led to a 30% uplift in voter turnout for targeted groups (DCMSC 2019). Cambridge Analytica moved on to work with Ted Cruz and eventually Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, where they used a micro-targeting technique to display customized messages about Trump to different US voters on various digital platforms, with grouping based on whether individuals were Trump supporters or potential “swing votes” (Weaver 2018). Swing voters were shown images of Trump’s more notable supporters and negative graphics or ideas about Hillary Clinton. The “Make America Number 1 Super PAC” used collected data from Cambridge Analytica to aggressively attack

Hillary Clinton through advertisements that attempted to highlight Clinton's corruption as a way of advertising Trump as the ideal candidate for the presidency (Weaver 2018). They often utilized dark posted Facebook ads, which are posts that look like a regular post from a Facebook page but actually do not show up on a page's public timeline and are only seen by the users it was targeted to reach (Silverman 2018). The dark Facebook ads generated impressive reach and engagement on the platform, suggesting that the targeted messages connected with the intended audiences, helping deliver millions of video views and tens of thousands of comments and reactions (Silverman 2018). In October of 2016, the Defeat Crooked Hillary page, run by the Make America Number 1 Super PAC, targeted an ad that raised questions about Clinton's health and "echoed some of the conspiracy-minded claims about her that had been circulating and suggesting she needs to be tested for drugs" (Silverman 2018). The ad was dark posted twice in the same day, suggesting it was targeted at two different segments, and it eventually received hundreds of thousands of views and engagements (Silverman 2018).

One of the largest ad campaigns was an ad developed by Cambridge Analytica that falsely asserted that Michelle Obama did "not trust" Hillary Clinton by taking words out of context to imply Clinton was unfit for office due to her husband's infidelity. The ad was fact checked and declared as manipulative and false by the Washington post, yet it garnered immense engagement on Facebook and online testing revealed that it increased the "very unfavorable" opinion of Clinton by 7 to 16 points in varying key demographic groups (Silverman 2018). Such ads were sent to targeted voters in key districts, and Cambridge Analytica's managing director Mark Turnbull later stated that their work with data and research allowed Trump to win with a narrow margin of "40,000 votes" in three states providing victory in the electoral college system, despite losing the popular vote by more than 3 million vote (Team 2018). Turnbull also

described how the company could create proxy organisations to discreetly feed negative material about opposition candidates onto Facebook, stating “sometimes you can use proxy organisations who are already there. You feed them the material and they do the work... We just put information into the bloodstream to the internet and then watch it grow... This stuff infiltrates the online community and expands... it’s unattributable, untrackable” (Team 2018). A post-election report from 2017 revealed that Cambridge Analytica’s “5,000+ ad campaigns” on behalf of Trump generated “1.5 billion impressions” (Naham). According to Cambridge Analytica, its pro-Trump “persuasion” ads corresponded with a 3% average favorability increase for Trump and get-out-the-vote ads “drove a 2% increase in voters submitting absentee ballots” (Naham 2020).

Although Cambridge Analytica repeatedly denied it and those involved continue to refuse to disclose the details of what occurred, they also worked extensively with the successful “Leave” campaign for the 2016 ‘Brexit’ EU referendum in the U.K. In November 2015, Leave.EU, the political campaign group that was first established to support the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union in the June 2016 referendum, posted on its website that Cambridge Analytica “will be helping us map the British electorate and what they believe in, enabling us to better engage with voters” (Stamp 2018). Arron Banks, the co-founder of Leave.EU, said in a book that in October 2015 his group hired Cambridge Analytica, and Analytica director Brittany Kaiser spoke at a Leave.EU news conference that same year, stating that her organization would be “running large-scale research of the nation to really understand why people are interested in staying in or out of the EU” (Stamp 2018). In February 2016, Cambridge Analytica chief executive Alexander Nix wrote that his company was working for Leave.EU, stating “we have already helped supercharge Leave.EU’s social media campaign by

ensuring the right messages are getting to the right voters online” (Stamp 2018). In a parliamentary investigation, concluded in 2019, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica did work for Leave.EU on the EU referendum. According to emails published by a House of Commons committee, the company never received trackable payment for it (Hern 2019). One internal Cambridge Analytica email outlined its relationship with the Brexit groups, stating "we are working with the campaign and their various partners to identify, profile and engage voters in the lead-up to the referendum on Britain’s EU membership” (Scott 2019). It additionally described having “extensive experience providing data-driven political communications advice to campaigns around the world, including at the highest level of U.S. politics,” (Scott 2019). In a report published in July 2018, it was confirmed that AIQ, the company Cambridge utilized to analyze user data, had access to the personal data of UK voters given by the Vote Leave campaign (DCMSC 2019).

d. Facebook’s Oversight

Though Dr. Kogan and Cambridge Analytica knew they were technically working in a breach of Facebook’s terms of service, Facebook never attempted to verify Kogan’s claim that the data was being used for academic purposes, revealing a significant internal issue in the company’s implementation of policy and terms of agreement (Rosenberg 2018). Outside businesses were able to collect user data on Facebook. Due to what is called a “data-sharing API,” if a user uses their Facebook account to log into a third-party app then outside 3rd-party companies can collect data about a user and their friends without their permission—a technique through which Cambridge Analytica collected data from millions of Facebook users without their permission (Anderson 2018). Sandy Parakilas, a former employee of Facebook told the British Parliament in a testimony that “once the data passed from Facebook servers to the

developer, Facebook lost insight into what was being done with the data and lost control over the data” (DCMSC 2019). There was essentially no proper audit trail of where the data went and during Parakilas’ time working there, he did not remember “one audit of a developer’s storage” (DCMSC 2019). This reveals a fundamental flaw in Facebook’s model of holding data, as the company cannot assure its users that their data is not being used by 3rd parties (DCMSC 2019).

In 2018, after Facebook assured its users of a change in handling and disclosure of political ads, Vice News published a report indicating that Facebook’s advertiser disclosure policy was susceptible to abuse, as reporters from Vice submitted advertisements for approval that credited Mike Pence, DNC chairman Tom Perez, and the Islamic State (ISIS) , all of which were approved by Facebook (Patterson 2020). Additionally, the contents of all the advertisements were copied from Russian advertisements, adding fuel to the suspicions of Russian advertising and meddling in the U.S. elections via Facebook’s platform (Patterson 2020). A spokesperson for Facebook confirmed to Vice that the copied content “does not violate rules.” According to Vice, the only denied submission was attributed to Hillary Clinton (Patterson 2020). In a later report in 2018, Vice also claimed that it successfully applied to purchase advertisements attributed to all 100 sitting US Senators, indicating that Facebook had yet to fix the problem reported earlier (Patterson 2020). Even after Cambridge Analytica and the SCL group dissolved in May of 2018, the legacy of the company lives on through new entities and a growing industry. SCL and Cambridge Analytica were only one medium-sized firm, and the ‘influence industry’ continues to spread on social media in markets across the globe. Facebook temporarily suspended another company later in 2018 that it believed harvested data from its site. The data analytics company Crimson Hexagon, based in Boston, had contracts with a Russian non-profit organization with ties to the Kremlin, exacerbating fears about user data

being shared with foreign governments for political intervention (DCMSC 2019). Facebook, however, eventually reinstated the company to the platform after its investigation without revealing the reasoning behind the decision to do so (DCMSC 2019).

e. Reactions, Policy Changes, & Effectiveness

How has Facebook as a whole responded to revelations about data sharing and international criticism? Facebook initially denied and defended its behavior, stating it never gave others access to personal data without people's permission and had seen no evidence that the data had been misused (“Facebook’s Data Sharing Deals Exposed” 2018). However, the company had acknowledged that it should have prevented third parties being able to tap into users' data after publicly announcing that it had ended the privilege for security reasons (“Facebook’s Data Sharing Deals Exposed” 2018). In 2018, Facebook eventually stated that it would make a variety of changes in how it collects and uses user data, ranging from banning some external apps to giving users more control. It promised to tighten apps’ access to data by greatly reducing the info users share. "We're reducing the data you give an app when you approve it to only your name, profile photo, and email address," said founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg in a prepared testimony to the U.S. House Energy and Commerce committee (Ivanova 2018). Facebook's chief technology officer laid out more details by stating that the company will “no longer allow apps to ask for access to personal information such as religious or political views, relationship status and details, custom friends lists, education and work history, fitness activity, book reading activity, music listening activity, news reading, video watch activity, and games activity” (Ivanova 2018). Zuckerberg’s testimony also stated that Facebook would be “removing developers' access to data if you haven't used their app in three months.” However, it is worth noting that these changes to apps do not affect the amount of information Facebook itself collects

about a user—it is still able to view information such as one’s political views and video viewing history, preserving its ability to serve targeted ads (Ivanova 2018). Facebook also promised that it was ending an advertisement program called "Partner Categories," that allowed marketers to pair information about a user’s offline activities with their Facebook profile. After Facebook came under scrutiny for selling ads to Russian-linked entities during the 2016 U.S. elections, the company also promised to disclose information on purchasers of political ads (Ivanova 2018).

Despite Facebook’s promises to implement a variety of procedures to stop sharing user data with 3rd parties, it publicly announced in a blog post in November of 2019 that around 100 developers may have improperly accessed user data, including the names and profile pictures of individuals in different Facebook groups (Nuñez 2019). The company explained that it was primarily social media management and video-streaming apps that had kept the ability to access member information, yet it did not detail the type of data that was improperly accessed and neither did it disclose the number of users affected (Nuñez 2019). Facebook restricted its developer APIs (which provided apps to interface with Facebook data) in 2018, yet over a year after the company restricted API access, they continued to announce newly discovered data leaks. Facebook said in a statement that “Although we’ve seen no evidence of abuse, we will ask them to delete any member data they may have retained and we will conduct audits to confirm that it has been deleted” (Nuñez 2019). In January of 2020, Facebook announced the launch of a new tool that allows users to view and delete data it collects from third parties, in a stepped-up effort to improve privacy practices, allowing users to see and clear "off Facebook activity" used for targeted advertising. Mark Zuckerberg stated that the tool offers "a new level of transparency and control" for the social network (“Facebook Rolls Out Tool Globally” 2020). In July of 2020, however, Facebook admitted that it had again mistakenly shared users’ personal data with

outside developers for a longer period of time than promised in another breach of the policies they implemented in 2018 (Wagner and Bloomberg 2020). The company said previously that 3rd party app developers would be blocked from accessing user data if a person did not interact with the app for 90 days. In some instances that failed to occur, as Facebook stated that they missed a blunder in the system that allowed developers to pull data from multiple users if a user of a third party app was connected to a Facebook friend through the same app, even if the friend had not opened the app in more than 90 days (Wagner and Bloomberg 2020). The company stated that this issue applies to apps from some 5,000 developers, but they once again did not disclose how many users might be affected (Wagner and Bloomberg 2020).

As recent as the 2020 presidential elections, an influential evangelical group called United In Purpose had declared its strategies to help reelect Trump included targeting minorities and various demographic groups using data-mining tools on Facebook (Fang 2020). Participants in the group include anti-gay activists and televangelist preachers arguing that America was founded as a fundamentalist Christian nation. Officials of the organization claimed their “data partners” had identified 26 million key voters in battleground states, about three-fourths of whom were Facebook users (Fang 2020). Other UIP officials described having previously run a network of 24 Facebook accounts with a combined 1.4 million followers, all of which were routinely filled with misinformation and hate (Fang 2020). One post shared across this network of Facebook groups claimed that refugee programs represented “cultural destruction and subjugation” and another asserted that Muslims are incapable of assimilation because a “normal Muslim’s loyalty is to Sharia law and supremacy” (Fang 2020). Additionally an official suggested driving a wedge between lesbians and the transgender community by bringing

attention to the fact that trans students would gain access to women's bathrooms and women's scholarships (Fang 2020).

The fact that user manipulation has still been made possible even after Facebook's alleged policy updates and changes to its monitoring over the last 3 years is of great concern. It shows that Facebook has continued to neglect its responsibility to monitor the actions of its users, associated developers, and 3rd party advertisers with access to its data. In the midst of a global growing influence industry, patterns of data use by tech companies on social media platforms need to be investigated and curbed with transparency and increasing urgency by companies, policymakers, and the public.

Online Radicalization & Facebook's Responsibility

a. Section 230 & Facebook's Influence

Within the past few years, tech companies have been under increasingly urgent pressure to take control of their user-generated platform and crack down on not only the patterns of data use, but also the posts on the platform containing misleading information. As the number of users grows, it becomes difficult to regulate what is shared on the platform. Facebook is an example of this incredible growth, as they grew from "100 million users in 2008 to more than 2 billion users in 2019" (Kim 2020), and throughout the years the platform became an online ecosystem that drove misinformation as it emerged as one of the dominant means for accessing information and communication online. And while pressure from citizens and the government has grown for Facebook to manage the spread of misinformation, Facebook has no legal incentive to respond to this pressure. Facebook, like all other tech companies, is protected under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, a law that effectively shields internet sites from legal liability of the content that is posted on their platform by third parties (Duffield

2021). This protection has played a vital role in the growth of many tech companies over the past few decades, as their user-generated content does not need to be extensively regulated in the name of preserving free speech. This is where the problem arises, as the granting of broad immunity from any form of civil litigation develops a system where large tech companies bear no responsibility or accountability for content that their algorithm and their users push. The expectation of user responsibility to these social media platforms introduces opportunities for bad actors to use these platforms as a vessel for extremist content. The ability for companies like Facebook to neglect misinformation and propaganda within the virtual world has consequences in the real world, with some of the content that was shared online over the past few years leading to an increase in the mobility of right wing extremism.

The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C., found that one in five Americans received news on a regular basis from social media and four in 10 got news from Facebook in 2018 (Kim 2020). The Pew survey also found that a majority (57 percent) of people who received news from social media expected some of the information to be inaccurate or false (Kim 2020). The rise of information shared and consumed through social media, a platform where interaction pushes attention rather than validity, has created tension within the United States. These incredibly large tech companies have done little to address the frustration that many Americans have about ideological biases on social media platforms that are presented through algorithms. Social media platforms play an increasingly important role in the radicalization and mobilization of both violent and non-violent extremists due to the exploitative nature of the growing misinformation (Jenson 2018). This is due to the fact that the rise of social media platforms has drastically changed the way people interact with and consume news, lowering the barriers to entry for news companies and increasing the ability of media companies

to influence the content users see. This influence is highlighted by the algorithms that are set in place within Facebook's platform that litigate the news that is presented to its users. Until the summer of 2016, Facebook had a team of professional journalists to curate the trending news box that can be seen from all users' news feed. Once it had been discovered that the team suppressed trending stories that slanted in a conservative direction, Facebook faced backlash from the Republican Party. The backlash forced Facebook to switch to software that curates the trending box to the individual user (Kim 2020). With this switch, Facebook experienced a new problem as the software was not sophisticated enough to distinguish between a factual news story and one that was misleading, causing a rise of misinformation being spread.

Facebook has been under increased scrutiny since the 2016 US presidential election, as the polarization created by the misinformation on the platform became a threat to the democratic process. In the critical month before the 2016 election, the misinformation that had proliferated on the platform undermined the political process as misinformation was taken as fact (Vaidhyanathan 2018). In a report issued in August of 2016, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that operatives of the Russian-based Internet Research Agency utilized social media disinformation campaigns to denigrate Clinton (Jenson 2018). Without the regulation of information on Facebook to properly manage the spread of false news, social media has become a tool to exploit and exacerbate tensions within the United States (Vacca 2020). This election put the influence social media has on the thought process of citizens on full display, showing just how easy it is to polarize different sections of users. Though public statements have since been released by Facebook in the wake of the election, stating the social network promises to 'eliminate hoaxes and block fake news,' CEO Mark Zuckerberg downplayed the site's role in distributing misinformation and voiced concerns over censorship (Vaidhyanathan 2018). As

Facebook's business model relies on clicking content regardless of veracity, this commercial motivation has outweighed the emerging need for misinformation censorship resulting from Facebook's failure to clamp down on fake news.

While tech companies are shielded from legal liability under Section 230, it also grants these companies the ability to restrict any third party content that violates their terms of agreements as long it is "in the act of good faith". The lack of available information about this process of restriction has led to a growing number of US citizens demanding increased transparency.

b. Polarization Through Algorithm

Originally designed to drive revenue, recommendation algorithms that are implemented within Facebook have created a system that allows extreme content to be promoted very easily. In most cases, online radicalization does not occur with the viewing of a single article or video, but is instead fed through constant exposure of predatory extremist views and online integration with like-minded individuals (Awan 2017). One of the main reasons social media has become as successful and powerful as it is today is its ability to easily share ideas with others, and the convenience to gather ideas of other individuals. (Jenson 2018). As the number of Facebook users grows, it becomes easier for misinformation to spread, and radical messaging begins to reach people who would otherwise not have been reachable. The spread of misinformation doesn't necessarily involve outlandish conspiracy theories, but rather relies on the constant exposure to misleading information on complex issues. The Facebook algorithm places users in polarized filter bubbles that have been manipulated by the slow spread misinformation.

Facebook's algorithm plays into human nature, reinforcing political polarization, as "people are more prone to accept false information and ignore dissenting information,"

(Youngblood 2020). Research has found that there is a lag of around 13 hours between the publication of a false report and its subsequent debunking. Having false information spread like wildfire for half a day exposes thousands if not millions of users to misinformation, and if the misinformation aligns with the users previous beliefs, the correct information would likely never reach them (Kim 2020). Shortly after a Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018, which resulted in the deaths of 11 people, Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) stated, “I have serious concerns that the proliferation of extremist content — which has radicalized violent extremists ranging from Islamists to neo-Nazis — occurs in no small part because the largest social media platforms enjoy complete immunity for the content that their sites feature and that their algorithms promote” (Eerten 2020). Half truths and misleading interpretations that fall in a grey area are pushed to users on the platform, and existing algorithms can lead users to enter Facebook's digital echo chamber.

Tech companies like Facebook have been able to optimize their metrics by the contents of their code, and the algorithm revolves around one central tenet: maximizing user engagement, and ultimately revenue (Hogan, 2014). Social media, news sites, and online forums have given an indisputably powerful platform to ideas that drive the rapid polarization we can see today that can lead to real-world violence. Through the work of recommendation algorithms, macabre musings no longer lie only in the darkest corners of the internet, but instead bask in the limelight of our feeds and queues (Eerten 2020). The personalization that is presented to the users of the platforms through the algorithms tend to shift into a tool of polarization because misinformation leads to a rabbit hole of false information. Individuals are being manipulated by this system by falling for fake news and then further perpetuating this system when they share it with their friends who trust them, which creates a never-ending loop of misinformation being shared

(Youngblood 2020). Guided by suggested hyperlinks and auto-fills in search bars, web surfers are being nudged in the direction of political or unscientific propaganda, abusive content, and conspiracy theories—the same types of ideas that appear to have driven the perpetrators of several mass shootings (Silke 2020). Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) took to Twitter after a shooter murdered 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, writing, “Facebook & other platforms should be held accountable for not stopping horror, terror, & hatred — at an immediate Congressional hearing” (Eerten 2020). Generally, as individuals immerse themselves in online extremist content, they begin to develop a skewed sense of reality in which their views no longer seem radical (Silke 2020). Online interactions with like-minded individuals can be a substitute for an individual’s physical community and create an online social environment similar to that of a gang in which deviant behavior and violence are the norm. Consumers of online extremist content can also develop or increase feelings of superiority, moral outrage, desensitization to violence, and willingness to commit acts of violence in the furthering of a particular cause (Vacca 2020).

c. Mobilization of Extremism

Open access within the virtual world forces countries and companies into a paradoxical position as the battle between free speech and maintaining control is becoming more violent. As more and more individuals are interacting with articles that contain misinformation, they become victims to predatory misinformation that uses bias to radicalize users. The mobilization of these extremists, who have been radicalized by the spread of misinformation via social media and the polarization of political parties, has become increasingly present in America (Littler 2019). It must be said that exposure to extremist content and users is far from the sole cause of the radicalization we see today, but the dangers lie in the current online capability for the spread of

misinformation and propaganda. Studies have shown that exposure to extremist content online radicalizes about 20% of domestic lone-actor terrorists within the United States, yet those lone actors are users that already hold similar views (Silke 2020). Social media platforms are not sufficient enough to cause radicalization, though that does not grant platforms the faultlessness of the dangerous real-world implications of misinformation that can reinforce extremists ideals. Keeping a balance between the freedom of American citizens and the responsibility of their safety is a task not only of the US government, but of tech companies like Facebook as well. As tensions within the United States worsen and the misinformation remains a tool of radicalization, the mobilization of these extremists becomes increasingly violent (Silke 2020). Violent and criminal actions with political motives are generally linked to broader political mobilizations, and the misinformation that is consumed by users of social media platforms is made up of political ideals and beliefs.

The use of social media is a feature of political and civic engagement for millions of people around the world and when social media platforms are the main source of users' news, the misinformation that is spread becomes increasingly dangerous. Social media has been used by extremist groups in order to manufacture a process of online hate, something that has been described as promoting violence through the social learning theory (Awan 2017). This theory asserts that “individuals learn deviant behaviour from other groups, which may lead to extremist learning that is categorised by association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation” (Awan 2017). The foundation of social media is built on a network of individuals interacting and sharing their stories through content, and when the shift is made between passive observers of information to creators of content, the new media dynamics shift, which can enable new types of political action (Heller 2016). As social media is an under-regulated framework that can be

accessed across the world, the anonymity provided allows bad actors to manipulate information to better suit their narrative. In a book review on the death of journalism, columnist Chris Hedges writes, “[online news] has severed a connection with reality-based culture...and replaced it with a culture in which facts, opinions, lies, and fantasy are interchangeable” (Jenson 2018). While traditional newspapers were used as primary sources of information and analysis, the shift on social media dependency due to its speed and flexibility has led to user misuse of the platforms, whether it be intentional or not. Research shows that extremist groups put forth hateful speech, offensive and violent comments, and messages focusing their mission using popular social media platforms to promote their ideology by spreading extremist content among their viewers (Awan 2017). When users are constantly exposed to these ideals that are seemingly valid, they are pushed into a vacuum of extremist content that can create polarization to a dangerous extent.

Lone wolf terrorism is political violence perpetrated by individuals who act alone. Within the last several years, both within the United States and abroad, an alarming number of terrorist attacks have been carried out by lone individuals or very small groups (Littler 2019). Though the radicalization of individuals cannot be pinpointed to a specific time or cause, social media usage enhances the spread of extremist ideology (Wahlström 2019). When it comes to right-wing extremism, one of the primary features of the extremist ideals that are promoted is the importance of nationalism, often creating a negative discourse about a group of people labeled as “other” (Wahlström 2019). Studies have shown that anti-refugee hate crimes are more likely to occur in areas with higher exposure to anti-refugee hate speech online (Müller 2020). Going further, a strong correlation has been found between negative posts concerning refugees on Facebook and violent incidents against refugees (Müller 2020). Whenever Facebook usage per person rose to one standard deviation above the national average, “anti-refugee incidents

increased by 50% and overall as much as 9% of anti-refugee incidents can be explained by anti-refugee posts on Facebook” (Müller 2020). The effects of online radicalization and the discourse that can be spread through misinformation, at worst, can lead to self-radicalized terrorists that commit cruel crimes. Increasing levels of far-right extremist violence have generated public concern within the last decade, as the far-right movement was responsible for 73.3% of all extremist murders in the United States. In 2018, this statistic rose to 98% (Wahlström 2019). The anonymity that is provided by online platforms exempts one from the consequences they can face from vocalizing extremist points of view, making the promotion of ideals a less risky task—especially when it comes to content with overt racism and white nationalism messaging. When those ideals reach an extreme the consequences are immense, as tragically illustrated on June 17, 2015, when Dylann Roof opened fire and killed nine African-Americans and injured one more in a church in Charleston, South Carolina (Müller 2020). It is difficult to pinpoint the amount of influence and importance online platforms have on radicalizing individuals enough to take matters into their own hands, but it is clear that the ideals that are able to be presented within the platform have real world impact and cannot be treated lightly.

d. Content Moderation

Shortly after Facebook released a report in May of 2017 acknowledging the “malicious actors” from around the world that had used the platform to meddle in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Mark Zuckerberg announced that the company would increase its “global moderation workforce” by two-thirds. A married couple in Dublin who had been made moderators in the new wave of hiring later spoke to news outlets stating that “they were just hiring anybody,” and that they were offered jobs immediately (Marantz 2020). After content moderators are hired, they are guided through the “Implementation Standards” and other documents that are “full of

technical jargon, not presented in any logical order,” stated Chris Gray, a former moderator (Marantz 2020). Gray further recalled, “most of the people in this room do not speak English as a first language,” wondering how it was going to work. Gray described how the new moderators were taught “unlike Facebook’s earliest moderators who were told to use their discretion and moral intuition,” that they were to “tolerate content, and refrain from adding friction to the process of sharing unless it achieves a direct and specific good,” according to the Implementation Standards (Marantz 2020).

Soon afterwards in 2018, a Channel 4 documentary in the U.K. aired undercover footage of a trainer giving a presentation on interpreting the Implementation Standards regarding hate speech. One slide showed a popular meme of an image of a white mother who seems to be drowning her daughter in a bathtub with the caption “when your daughter’s first crush is a little Negro boy.” In the video the trainer stated that although the image “implies a lot,” “there’s no attack, actually, on the Negro boy . . . so we should ignore this” (Marantz 2020). Another former moderator told the New Yorker that moderators are “in no way expected or equipped to fix the problem” of hate speech and described several other examples including “clear-cut” open praise for Hitler that apparently would be reviewed by moderators but never removed (Marantz 2020). A New Yorker reporter spoke to two current moderators in 2020 who listed many ways in which they believed their supervisors’ interpretations of the Implementation Standards conflicted with common sense and basic decency. One of the moderators recounted reviewing a profile with the username ‘KillAllFags’ with the profile pic containing a rainbow flag being crossed out. “The implied threat is pretty clear,” she stated, but she said that she could not take it down as their supervisors would insist that “L.G.B.T. is a concept.” The moderator explained that if they see someone posting ‘Kill L.G.B.T.,’ that unless they refer to a person or use pronouns, they would

“have to assume they’re talking about killing an idea” which does not go against Facebook’s guidelines (Marantz 2020).

After the new hiring wave of content moderators post-2017, Britain First, a white-nationalist political party in the U.K. had an active Facebook page with around two million followers, in which members would post videos featuring “a bunch of thugs moving through London, going, ‘Look, there’s a halal butcher. There’s a mosque. We need to reclaim our streets,’” (Marantz 2020). Additionally, the group was involved in engaging in violent scare tactics in real life, including “driving around Muslim parts of London in combat jeeps” and “barging into mosques wearing green paramilitary-style uniforms” (Marantz 2020). A former moderator explained that if they were allowed to consider the context, and the fact that “Britain First” echoes the slogan “America First” once used by Nazi sympathizers in the U.S. and the many other connotations of their Party members’ words and actions, then they would be able to surmise that their activities on Facebook were a call for violence. The moderator described, however, they were “not allowed to look at the context” and that they could “only look at what’s right in front of (them),” meaning that although Britain First’s posts were constantly getting reported, the wording would always be “just vague enough” that he could never justify deleting them to his supervisors (Marantz 2020).

On December 18, 2017, on a workplace message board called ‘Community Standards Feedback,’ a worker in Facebook’s London office wrote that Britain First is “pretty much a hate group” and asked whether Facebook would follow the steps that YouTube and Twitter had already taken to ban them. Facebook’s public-policy director for trust and safety Neil Potts responded, stating “thanks for flagging, and we are monitoring this situation closely.” He continued however, adding that “while Britain First shares many of the common tenets of alt-

right groups, e.g., ultra-nationalism,” Facebook did not consider it a hate organization (Marantz 2020). Potts wrote, “we define hate orgs as those that advance hatred as one of their primary objectives, or that they have leaders who have been convicted of hate-related offenses.” Nearly two months after this interaction, a white British man by the name of Darren Osborne was convicted of murder after driving a van into a crowd near a London mosque, killing a Muslim man and injuring at least nine others. The prosecuting investigation introduced evidence suggesting Osborne had been inspired to kill partly by following Britain First and far-right activists such as Tommy Robinson on social media. The judge deemed the killing “a terrorist act” by a man who’d been “rapidly radicalized over the Internet” (Marantz 2020). Within six weeks of the investigation, Facebook finally banned Britain First and Tommy Robinson from their platform.

e. Current Affairs and Performative Changes

Facebook, like many other companies, has had to realize their position in not only the virtual world but the real world, as they have become so intertwined that it is impossible to separate. Through the few years following the 2016 U.S. elections, social media platforms have attempted to put more effort in managing the content that was shared within their platform as pressure from the citizens and government has increased (Cram 2019). In 2019, Facebook reported that it had disabled more than 5 billion fake accounts between January and September of that year, an act that signified an inclination to crack down on misinformation and the volume of social media content that can be produced through those fake accounts (Vacca 2020). The platform's decisions on content moderation and censorship became crucial during the 2020 elections, however (Duffield 2021). As Section 230 evolved into a highly debated topic, content decisions were watched carefully as citizens became increasingly aware of the misinformation

that corrupted the Facebook platform and the increase in extremist rhetoric and misinformation concerning the Covid-19 pandemic (Kim 2020). Politicians also watched carefully as it was crucial to reach out to the people and connect to them directly, something that would not have been possible if they fell victim to the platform's weeding of misinformation (Vacca 2020).

During the 2020 elections, Facebook came under controversy and criticism once more for its inability and lack of inclination to moderate Facebook content that had dangerous real-life consequences. On May 29th, 2020 on his Facebook and Twitter account, President Trump wrote about sending the National Guard in to fight protesters in response to George Floyd's death, stating "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." This phrase had been used by prominent segregationists to justify violent attacks against Black people (including civil-rights protesters) in the 1960s, and Trump's usage of this language was widely seen to be a clear incitement to violence (Marantz 2020). While Twitter did not remove Trump's tweets it did add 'warning labels' to them. Facebook, however, did nothing. As Vanita Gupta, the president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Human Rights stated, "the feeling among activists was why have we spent years pushing Facebook to adopt better policies if they're just going to ignore those policies when they matter most?" On August 19th of the same year, Facebook announced a new change in guidelines that restricted the activities of "organizations and movements that have demonstrated significant risks to public safety," including "US-based militia organizations" (Marantz 2020). Many pointed out how Facebook was very late to come up with these rules, and others also noted that hundreds of pages still remained after the implementation of these policies. Four days after the policy update, a police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin shot a Black man named Jacob Blake seven times in the back in front of his children. When protests subsequently erupted, 'The Kenosha Guard,' a self-described militia put a "call to arms" up on its Facebook

page, where people were excitedly and explicitly sharing their intentions to commit vigilante violence by writing statements including “I fully plan to kill looters and rioters tonight” (Marantz 2020). BuzzFeed reported that within one day, over 400 people reported the page to Facebook content moderators but the moderators decided that it “did not violate any of Facebook’s standards” and left it all up. Six days later on August 25th, a white seventeen-year-old travelled to Kenosha from out of state and shot three protesters, killing two of them with a semi-automatic rifle. While it is not clear whether he learned about the Kenosha Guard on Facebook, the militia’s page was public regardless, and anyone could have seen it or taken inspiration from their calls to violence (Marantz 2020).

Later in October of 2020, Facebook banned several militarized social movements from maintaining Facebook pages, groups, and Instagram accounts, and also banned all content relating to QAnon, the far-right conspiracy theory. Additionally it took down a post by Trump that contained misinformation pertaining to the coronavirus, and announced plans to ban all political ads from the platform starting on Election Night (Marantz 2020). Then, shortly after the storming of the Capital, further steps were taken by platforms in removing a wide range of content that may have fueled the violent event, including removing accounts run by former President Trump. Facebook’s critics considered such measures once again to be “too little, too late” and described them to be “performative changes,” arguing that the company was still failing to “change its broken algorithm, or take responsibility for the power it’s amassed” (Marantz 2020). The refusal of large tech companies to recognize their power and allowing their platform to run without making value judgments of its own in regards to how the platform is being used has resulted in dangerous consequences.

Recommendations

Facebook is no longer a neutral platform that is simply a tool to help users connect with people and share updates with friends. Facebook has had an inconsistent and often incoherent approach to protecting the bedrock values of an equal society. The company is in dire need of recalibration to fight the manipulation of users and incitements to violence through hate speech and the mass spread of misinformation. The company needs to implement new policies that ensure the safety of its users, and the government must carefully craft new legislation to ensure that these guidelines are enforced.

Facebook cannot allow 3rd-party companies to collect information on people without their consent; they must give users more control over their own data, and they must also provide more transparency on who is granted access to user data. This can be enforced by government legislation in the form of a 'privacy bill' that would require the creation of data privacy protections for consumers. This legislation should require companies to give users clear information about how their data will be used and should mandate that users be given the choice to opt 'into' sharing their personal information instead of having to opt out. Beyond formal legislation, the creation of a governmental agency or institution to oversee and deal with situations like the Cambridge Analytica breach would be useful. Such an agency would be able to oversee how consumer data is collected, shared, and used by companies as well as represent the rights of consumers in cases of data misuse like the Cambridge Analytica situation. Facebook must also set an ethical advertising policy in which it should be required that political ads be more transparent so people know who is paying for them. This should be enforced via the creation of legislation that would require tech companies to maintain a public file of all political ads purchased by any person or group.

Additionally, taking responsibility for the content being spread on the platform can be enforced on a governmental level by restructuring Section 230. Tech companies must be held somewhat liable for the content of users' posts (particularly hate speech and misinformation), so that they will finally be incentivized to moderate user content. The scale of Facebook's reach makes uniform governance extremely difficult; By adding governmental pressure on liability, however, the focus on monetary gain can shift to one of protection for users. By placing some liability and responsibility on the tech companies, they will no longer be able to stand by while their platform is being used as a tool for the spread of misinformation and extremist ideologies. Furthermore, tech companies' focus on creating revenue have left their algorithms with enormous power that often plays a large role in the spread of misinformation. Reducing the effect of filter bubbles by showing users a wider variety of opinions rather than having technologies that result in online extremist vacuums will result in the exposure of diverse views that is key in combating online rabbit holes of extremism. By revising the algorithmic technology within the platform, and relying on some combination of user and algorithmic flagging paired with review by human moderators, the level of misinformation that passes through the algorithmic walls will be greatly decreased. The government can ensure that Facebook enforces these changes by forcing the company to be transparent about how the algorithm operates. Australia's Competition and Consumer Commission recently suggested that an "algorithm regulator" should be introduced to have the power to request information on how Facebook's machine-learning algorithms rank content.

When an authority figure turns a blind eye to issues that are arising under their watch, those issues often fester into a problem that is much bigger than the authority itself. Over the long term, Facebook must take measurable steps to accept responsibility and its business model

must eventually evolve to center around trust. This will only be likely if the government steps in to regulate its actions.

Conclusion

Facebook's clear neglect of the abuse of influence and power on its platform has had far-reaching and momentous consequences. The company's lax policies and disinclination to implement forms of content moderation on spreading hate speech and misinformation as well as barriers to data access have led to an immense ideological polarization of users and as a result, society. "[Online news] has severed a connection with reality-based culture...and replaced it with a culture in which facts, opinions, lies, and fantasy are interchangeable" (Hughes 2018). Additionally, Facebook's general lack of transparency and unwillingness to be held accountable for the manipulation-through-misinformation phenomenon on its platform has created a window for external groups and political campaigns to assert 'influence' on citizens, having grave implications for the state of democracy. As Karim Amer, director and researcher on influence campaigns states, "there is an auction happening for influence campaigns in every democracy around the world. There is no vote that is unprotected in... the current space that we're living" (Goodman 2020). Our chapter reveals the need for Facebook to accept accountability for the power it wields over its 2.2 billion users, and the ways in which its lack of taking responsibility has led to real world shifts in the socio-political landscape. Our analysis showcases the necessity for holding Facebook accountable, transparency regarding Facebook's actions, as well as the need for developing policies that recalibrate the platform to avoid polarization and manipulation of its users and society.

Chapter Five: When the Government is the Culprit

By Zoe Schenk and Anoushka Srinivas

Venezuela's Communication Hegemony and Citizen Pushback

Venezuela is, by many modern measures, a failed state. Nicolás Maduro serves as an authoritarian dictator, and since 2016, the economy has been in a violent tailspin, leaving thousands of Venezuelans in worsening conditions. While the international community may be aware of the reality in Venezuela, many Venezuelans can't get their hands on accurate, unbiased news, because of the control the Maduro regime has over state media and access to the internet. The Venezuelan government employs a number of techniques to ensure Maduro and his party stay in power, including government ordered Twitter trolls, internet blackouts, and the jailing of independent reporters and regular social media users ("Venezuela" Human Rights Watch 2021). However, Venezuelans are using new methods like sharing news on Whatsapp and other social media platforms to stay ahead of the government and share necessary information (Fernández 2021, 46). One example of this use of social media was when massive protests were organized in January of 2019, in response to a clearly fraudulent election. Venezuela is a case study in how a failed democracy attempts to control its citizens through media control, and how those citizens fight to share knowledge and protest censorship. This case study will argue that social media is a tool used by governments to spread disinformation, but it is also a tool used by activists to organize protests against unfair and unjust laws and treatment and by locals in order to share information amongst themselves.

As of 2020, Venezuela has what has been coined a "communications hegemony," where the government has control of most media organizations in the country (Puyosa 2019, 4). There are very few independent news shows, and even those are heavily influenced by Maduro's propaganda. The price of paper is so high within the country that newspapers all had to shut

down (Nugent 2019). The country's main state-run telecommunications firm, CANTV, blocks access to apps and websites, keeping people from obtaining information or any news (Berwick 2018). This became especially problematic during 2019, which was a year of protests in Venezuela. Access to Wikipedia was blocked from the country entirely for a majority of the month of January. Many people were left without any idea about the goings on in the country, or who their president was. Juan Guaidó, the opposition leader who claimed power after a fraudulent election in late 2018, was left without any means to speak to the people of Venezuela, because any time he promoted a speech he was making on social media, the government blocked those social media platforms (Garsd 2019).

It is a constant battle between citizens and the government: who has access to accurate and factual news and information? The Venezuelan government has a lot of tricks up its sleeve, seeing as it has been actively using technological warfare on information for over a decade. The government uses Domain Name Systems (DNS) to block certain websites, and filters content using keywords, keeping valuable information hidden from the general public (Puyosa 2021, 36). This was particularly effective in May of 2019, when Guaidó staged a military coup in an attempt to remove Maduro from power, calling on the Venezuelan people to take to the streets in protest. The call to assemble went out early in the morning, and then the internet went down, with most social media platforms being blocked to stop the spread of information about the attempted coup. CANTV accounts for "about 70% of Venezuela's fixed internet connections and 50% of mobile," (Associated Press 2019) meaning the government can crack down and institute an internet blackout when they feel it is necessary to maintain power for Maduro. When it became harder to share information, the protests lost power quickly and petered out, leaving the Maduro government in power and Guaidó and his supporters scrambling to re-group.

It's not just blocking social media platforms or blacking out the internet—leaked government documents show that they employ an army of trolls to spread misinformation online. There is a certain irony in the ability of a failed state to control the media to this extent, yet be unable to advance the economy or alleviate the suffering of its citizens. While bots were first used on Twitter in 2010 to cultivate trends, the army of trolls today is much more sophisticated. The troll army is divided into five “squads”: pro-government, opponents, neutrals, distraction, and fake news. These five squads work together to coordinate official and bot accounts to ensure they control the daily trending topics, hijack opposition hashtags in order to mess with their message, and promote distracting hashtags with misleading and scandalous information in order to distract from actual information available on Twitter (Puyosa 2021, 39-42). While most grassroots groups can pick out troll accounts, it is demoralizing to the democratic cause to fight against the aggressive wave of fake news spread by the government. This leads to a sense of mistrust on social media sites, because it can be difficult for people to determine what's true and what's false information. By muddying the waters, so to speak, the Venezuelan government makes it a lot harder to successfully spread information online, further isolating people.

In 2018, Maduro pushed through anti-hate legislation that has since been used to jail reporters and opposition leaders who haven't actually committed any crimes. The Law against Hatred and for the Peaceful Convivence (aka the Anti-Hatred Law) is a vague law that increases the dangers for local and international journalists and normal social media users who step a little too far over the line of insolence towards the government. Essentially, it “criminalizes actions that ‘incite hate’ against a person or group,” (Berwick 2020) and this wording has allowed the president to use the law to persecute anyone who spoke ill of himself or his allies. The Maduro government also uses force to silence journalists. For example, on January 23rd, 2019, when

Guaidó declared himself interim president, a local non-governmental organization counted 17 direct attacks against journalists, from arbitrary detentions and confiscation of equipment to violence by the police ("Venezuela," Reporters 2019). Fear of retribution has led to self-censorship from many prominent Venezuelan journalists, which compounds the lack of information that is available to the Venezuelan people.

Not only is there heavy government censorship, there is also a lack of resources and access to the internet. At the end of 2019, 46.6% of households in Venezuela had access to the internet, and 63.8% of the population had limited access to the internet through data plans on cell phones (Puyosa 2021, 36). The total number of people with access to the internet has declined since 2017, which is an uncommon trend among developing nations. In comparison, in both Colombia and Brazil, about 65% of the population had access to the internet in 2019 ("Percentage 2020," "Internet 2020"). In addition, due to the economic crisis, the government rations electricity, so many people go through long periods of time with no access to power. This means they are unable to charge their phones, which just makes accessing the internet that much more difficult (Herrera 2019).

Is it possible to fight back against the government's "communications hegemony?" Despite all of the odds being stacked against them, Venezuelan's are still finding ways to beat government censorship and share valuable information amongst themselves. More and more people are using virtual private networks (VPNs) to get around government censors on social media and the internet. This doesn't always work, however, especially because the government can block the most common VPN apps (Puyosa 2021, 33) when it needs to. In 2018, Google tested an anti-censorship app in Venezuela. Intra, the app, worked like a phone book for the internet, by "connecting users' phones directly to Google servers that access the domain name

system,” (Smith 2018). This enabled some information to be accessed, but since Intra was only available to Android users, it did not have a huge reach in Venezuela.

Other times, Venezuelans rely on information from family members outside the country. This was true for many during the tumultuous months of 2019, when who was in charge of the country was almost constantly in question. With no means to access any information about Juan Guaidó, the protests, or the coup attempt, local Venezuelan’s depended on their family abroad to send messages via Whatsapp (Herrera 2019). This was made difficult by multiple aspects of the government censorship mentioned above, but the primary concern is lack of power to charge phones. No power means no battery, which means even if someone had family abroad, they would still have no way to communicate with them.

Journalists also take their own safety into their hands and find ways to broadcast the news without access to a news studio. Starting in late 2019, a “group of citizen newscasters have been wandering the streets of a Caracas neighborhood” (Lauvergnier 2020) in order to broadcast news for the residents around them. Independent journalism, even on a very localized level, is one way Venezuelans are sidestepping government censorship and spreading information about the situation in the country.

Whatsapp has become the shining beacon of hope for many Venezuelans, and one of the most effective methods of sharing information without government interference. There are initiatives started by independent journalists, like Public Information Service, which aim to inform Venezuelans by creating and circulating one minute audio recordings of the day’s top news via WhatsApp groups (Herrera 2019). WhatsApp is encrypted, meaning it can’t be blocked or hacked in the same way other social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can. In a sample of 1,216 cases, it was found that two out of three Venezuelans use WhatsApp,

and among opposition members that number increases to 81.3%, while among supporters of the Maduro government it decreases to 57.2% (Fernández 2021, 54). One in three of the users surveyed above had read the news headlines through WhatsApp (Fernández 2021, 55). While WhatsApp is just the latest in an attempt to find a way to get around internet censorship, it is so far the most successful, and was used to organize the protests in both 2017 and 2019 against the Maduro government. Activists and journalists also use WhatsApp as a way to spread information, like through the service Información Pública. Información Pública is a short audio news bulletin created by journalists and then distributed on WhatsApp or Soundcloud (Nugent 2019). This way, news can be shared quickly and easily throughout a lot of people.

There are not many next steps that can be taken in the short-term in Venezuela. On an international level, tech companies like Twitter and Facebook can block or tag troll accounts. This would make it easier for regular citizens to use social media as a way to connect and communicate without fear of spreading misinformation. Journalists can continue to use apps like WhatsApp to share short snippets of news that are relevant to the people of Venezuela, and that can be shared rapidly. It is important for journalists to make sure the information they are sharing is accurate—that means citing sources and avoiding self-censorship. The international community needs to pressure the Venezuelan government to release journalists and social media users who have been jailed under the 2017 anti-hate law, to ensure a safer media environment for journalists. As of right now, the people of Venezuela are unable to speak freely, for fear of being jailed. In the long-term, international support should go to grassroots organizations that are working on sharing information in Venezuela.

It is difficult to hold the government accountable for the spread of disinformation and the aggressive censorship of the media. Maduro is only gaining power, and in the most recent

election, which took place in December 2020, his party finally gained control of the National Assembly, meaning all branches of government are under his influence. Realistically, the crackdown on the media will only get worse, especially with COVID-19 pandemic restrictions taking place in the country. However, it has been shown that social media can be used for good as well, with Venezuelans using messaging services like WhatsApp to share news and organize protests against the restrictions being placed on them.

BJP's Media Crackdown in Kashmir

On August 5, 2019, the Indian government abrogated Article 370, a special constitutional provision that allowed the 1947-acceded state of Jammu & Kashmir to maintain autonomy such that the Indian constitution “could be applied to the state from time to time [only] as modified by the President through a Presidential Order, and upon the concurrence of the state government” (Bhatia 2019). By putting the region under lockdown and cutting off telecommunication access, the abrogation of Article 370 appears to have been largely successful in the eyes of the government led by the Hindu nationalist and BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, this was done at the expense of the rights of Kashmiris. This chapter argues that government interventions with lockdowns and media censorship in Kashmir were largely symbolic and political moves to construe and control the broader narrative for the Indian public such that Hindu nationalistic agendas are further propagated. These ongoing threats to press freedom only set dangerous precedents for the rest of the country, and thereby threaten democracy in their wake.

To assess the nature of government influence on Indian media, understanding the broader Indian media landscape is important. Based on a 2019 research by Reporters Without Borders

(RSF) and DataLEADS in Delhi, India's "media is rich and varied – the ownership is diverse at the national level, and concentrated at the regional level" such that 17,160+ registered daily newspapers are available in English, Hindi and regional languages, while more than 400 out of nearly 900 television channels are news channels that are steadily growing ("Who Owns the Media in India? Media Ownership Monitor" 2019). Online extensions of print media and magazine outlets are equally competitive amongst individual and media company owners, whereas All India Radio funded by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) is the sole state-run broadcaster who owns a monopoly of news radio (ibid.). While the individuals and media companies seem to function as an independent press externally, their financial backers appear to have considerable political leanings which "signifies presence of a risk to media pluralism" (ibid.). This reveals that though the media landscape remains diverse, the financial connections to politicians with different agendas creates the dramatic polarity present in Indian journalism. In essence, the government exercises soft power over Indian media.

Upon understanding the scope of government control over the broader Indian media, it is important to also understand other means by which the Indian public attain information. In terms of public access to online information, India's traffic is the second largest internet market after China's as of January 2020 largely dominated by mobile internet users with an internet penetration rate of 50%, a staggering growth rate over the years, due to the government's Digital India initiative and cheaper technology options reducing barriers (Keelery 2020). With simplified access to the internet, it was found that consumers' top usage was for visiting social sites, such as Facebook, and streaming videos. Understanding this overview helps gain a better sense of how the Indian public engages with various kinds of media to distill their information daily.

To contextualize the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, it was no stand-alone event but

only another opportunity for the Indian government to promote Hindu nationalism and present its dominance. India and Pakistan have had long-standing disagreements and wars over the Kashmir issue since the time of independence and their general motivations as analyzed in 1996 can be stated as such: “While Pakistan’s claim on Kashmir is based on the state’s Muslim-majority population and its geographical contiguity, for India, Kashmir was at first an emblem of religious tolerance in the Indian secular state but subsequently was seen to be securing the Indian unity – the government feared Kashmir’s exit could prompt the desire for secession in other parts of the country” (Gabel, Reichert, and Reuter 2020). This noble need for unity and security in relation to Kashmir still aligns with Modi who was quoted in the BJP 2019 manifesto saying, “India supports peace, but the country will not hesitate to take any steps required for national security” (Perrigo 2019). Months later, the Indian government imposed a telecommunications curfew where local journalists weren’t allowed to operate (Jamwal 2019). Furthermore, the Indian armed forces were using pellet guns to combat protests, and mass arrests were made of social activists and past Chief Ministers, alike (ibid.). Considering this level of precaution taken to censor and curb press freedom, it is debatable that what the Indian government really wants is to establish peace by ceasing total administrative control over Kashmir and especially under the pretext of preserving national security. It is necessary to be mindful of legitimate concerns over national security however, considering that India has had major attacks stemming from militant groups in Pakistan and insurgencies in Indian-administered Kashmir within the two decades of the 21st century such as the Kargil War of 2001, bombing of the Taj Hotel in 2008, or the escalating skirmishes in Pulwama early 2019. These individual events have only increased enmity between the two countries. In addition to this, abrogating Kashmir’s special status became a political tool in the 2019 general election campaign that only tapped into “many Hindu voters’ hostility

towards Muslims and mistrust of Pakistan” (Perrigo 2019). This only further reveals that the government’s Hindu nationalistic rhetoric worsens Indo-Pakistani relations alongside worsening relations with the people of Kashmir. The crackdown on the people of Kashmir further questions the legitimacy of the democratic state that was formed on secular grounds.

Evidently, the Hindu nationalist sentiment seems to worsen Indo-Pakistani relations and the relationship between the Indian government and the people of Kashmir. If one wonders why the greater Indian public largely absorbs Modi’s rhetoric, it comes back to how the softly polarized media landscape and journalists play a role in diffusing government narratives to the public. In a 2020 comparative study analyzing press coverage on Kashmir by prominent English newspapers in India and Pakistan, it was found that 81.13% of content was war-oriented compared to only 18.86% of peace contents (Khan and Khan 2020). In other words, the style of journalism in Kashmir is geared towards reporting more about the unresolved conflicts, casualties, and escalating politics propagating the government narratives of their country of origin more than reports about Kashmiri progress and development that may be taking place despite the on-going conflict. As the study further suggests, if tensions between the three parties have to improve in the future, journalists play a crucial role in highlighting those underrepresented stories that do not just focus on war and tragedy but also humanize the experiences of the Kashmiri people for the two nations. The absence of such narratives evidently allows the larger Indian (or Pakistani) public to solely rely on the dominant narrative that the government provides regarding its activity in the militarized zone.

This ability to use the dominant narrative to their advantage is now no longer limited to the disputed boundaries of Kashmir. For instance, in 2018, the then BJP President Amit Shah was linked to a district cooperative bank abruptly netting the highest bank deposits after Modi’s

demonetization unfolded (“Reliance-Run Websites, Times Now and New Indian Express Take Down Story on Amit Shah” 2018). However, prominent news sites such as *Times Now*, *New Indian Express*, *News18.com*, etc., had to take down their coverage regarding this (ibid.). Many such instances have increased in frequency during Modi’s governance where reporting dissent against the BJP or the Indian government have been forcefully removed. With increasing censorship and financial backing at stake, it comes as no surprise that the seemingly diverse Indian media chooses to propagate rhetoric that aligns with Modi’s nationalism.

Apart from traditional media outlets or their digital platforms, the government also has reach in controlling narratives and curtailing behaviors of the free press via social media. To justify the abrogation of Kashmir, Home Minister Amit Shah addressed the people of Kashmir in his speech on the parliament floor by stating that “it’s because of these sections [referring to Article 370] that democracy was never fully implemented, corruption increased in the state, that no development could take place” (*BBC News* 2019). Later that day, Amit Shah uses his Twitter platform to amplify the message to the public by congratulating the entire nation that there will no longer be “do nishaan-do samvidhan” (two flags, two constitutions), and Modi in-turn congratulates Amit Shah on his unwavering commitment towards the unity and integrity of the motherland (“No More ‘Two Flags, Two Constitutions’: Amit Shah Tweets on Article 370 Abrogation” 2019). Prominent Kashmiri journalists like Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal can easily rebut Amit Shah’s claims of attributing Kashmir’s corruption and lack of relative development to the larger Indian nation directly to Article 370 by bringing to light how the Indian government is partly responsible for the prolonged state of Kashmir because they “alienated and suppressed” the aspirations and rights of the Kashmiri people (Jamwal 2019). This perspective is of relevance because it shows how the Indian government not only uses its political power to present its

nationalistic narratives but further misinforms the public and shapes their understanding of a region's know-how that they are barely aware of. Social media platforms just amplify these narratives.

Again, the government has understood how to use social media platforms to their advantage. While censoring Kashmir, "the Narendra Modi government issue[d] its highest-ever number of monthly blocking orders to Twitter, with all of the censorship requests aimed at Kashmir-related content" ("Kashmir: Modi Govt's Blocking Orders to Twitter Raise Questions Over Transparency" 2019). According to Twitter's Transparency Reports, there was an uptick of legal demands in the second half of 2019 to remove 667 accounts which in the previous year was limited to 144 removal requests which, up until then, was the highest ("India - Twitter Transparency Center" n.d.). In this way, stifling press freedom has increasingly become part of the government's approach to dealing with the media. It is unclear if the government does this with malice, but it is clear that they pick and choose narratives that showcase them in the best light to the broader Indian public.

Stifling press freedom and amplifying narratives that support the government's propaganda alone is dangerous. As mentioned earlier, the government tries to control the narrative and justify its actions on the basis of maintaining stability and security, but some Kashmiri journalists have voiced that banning internet and mobile phone services have led to worse law and order situations as people remained misinformed in the absence of functional media (Koul 2018). This further shows how the government is blindsided on the negative impact of its actions where its presumptuous exercise of censorship in the name of protecting the people actually harms them. An uninformed public with limited and construed information only becomes the next catalyst in spreading more misinformation. With regards to being blindsided by

their own presumptions, the government cannot continue justifying that it uses internet shutdowns as a pre-emptive measure when they are not fool-proof methods to prevent mobilization and violence (Taneja and Shah 2019). Having become well-acquainted with repeated internet shutdowns and government oppression, people in Kashmir have found other means to work with shutdowns despite the dangers by passing information word of mouth or even travelling to adjoining districts to upload or send videos (ibid.). This reveals not only the inefficiency behind repeated internet lockdowns to control violent outbreaks and maintain security, but also the normalization of government intervention. If Kashmiri people and journalists have to put their life at risk every time during an internet shutdown just to have their underrepresented voices heard in any manner, a democracy that constitutionalized free speech and press freedom as fundamental rights of its citizens does come into question. From a legal standpoint, to understand what allows the government to intervene in such manner, it exercises Section 69A under the IT Act (2008) and Blocking Rules that provide statutory access to block access to “information generated, transmitted, received, stored, or hosted in any computer resource” but only upon providing reasons in writing and subjecting this power with clear rules on procedures and safeguards (Bhardwaj et al. 2020). Considering the frequent exercise of these statutory laws to the broad extent of prolonged internet shutdowns indicates that these procedures and safeguards are not enforced strictly. There do not seem to be enough checks and balances to prevent the government from overextending its power. In this manner, a government abusing its power and maintaining control with its favorable narratives is dangerous for press freedom and democracy.

With regards to reckoning with the foundational principles of democracy and preserving freedom of speech and thereby press freedom, it indeed extends beyond Kashmir in very real

ways. In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India (2020)* where the government's exercise of power in Kashmir are brought into question, the Supreme Court clarifies the scope of powers under Section 69A by stating that it cannot be used to "restrict the internet generally" but only to "block access to particular websites on the internet" (Bhardwaj et al. 2020). However, oppressive internet shutdowns have continued whether related to Citizens' Amendment Act (2020) or the ongoing Farmer's Protest. In the middle of a raging pandemic, "India saw 83 shutdowns in 2020, and in just a little over a month in 2021, there have been seven shutdowns" (Suresh 2021). The tight rope that the government walks on in the name of preserving national security seems to only be eroding free speech and press freedom. If the government continues to treat all those against the Hindu nationalist ideology as threats to the nation rather than fellow citizens who have the right to dissent and challenge discourse, no matter how successful the government thinks it is in maintaining control by increasing censorship and amplifying information in their favor, it is hardly enough to sustain Indian democracy in the long-run.

Thus far, by using the 2019 abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir as a case study, this section of the chapter has addressed the general soft power the BJP-led Indian government exercises over Indian media where politicians act as financial backers to traditional media networks and narratives that only reinforce Hindu nationalistic agenda are supported. However, reinforcing their agenda has taken the forms of outright internet shutdowns, forced removal of dissenting content on traditional and social media platforms, and continued amplification of supportive narratives on different platforms. These actions of curbing press freedom and freedom of speech have only acted as precedents in the rest of the country as if to legitimize the frequency with which the government can exercise its power with statutory laws like Section 69 A in the name of preserving national security and stability. In reality, their blindsided presumptions are

not fool-proof and turn the people into the enemy of the nation instead of citizens who have the right to dissent and voice their concerns in a democratic state. By choosing selective narratives and repeatedly censoring dissenting journalists, the government overextends its power to keep the broader public uninformed. An uninformed public is in essence a threat to democracy.

To address these issues, the following recommendations could be considered. First, the Indian government could establish an internal governing agency on the central and state levels that exclusively assesses the procedures and safeguards used to exercise statutory laws such as Section 69 A and Blocking Rules. This agency will work closely with the judicial branch and the executive branches to assess how laws are implemented and act as the intermediary to enforce checks and balances. Second, internet and communications governing agencies such as the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) and MIB will have to provide transparent information on the evolving state of technology to other governing agencies to enable a consensus on how the government diffuses information to the public and interacts with them via traditional and new media platforms. Third, to truly diversify the media landscape, established news sources will have to find alternative sources of funding on a grassroots level to challenge government censorship. Lastly, these are recommendations striving to foster a more inclusive, representative government that listens to the people.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above case studies that the government is not always a solution to the spread of misinformation, but is instead the cause. While this is especially true in authoritarian regimes, the examples above are not stand-alone cases—misinformation spread by government officials, from minor cabinet members to the President or Prime Minister, can lead to confusion

and frustration from citizen's in these countries. If nothing else is gained from the experiences of those within Venezuela and India, it should be clear that a functioning free and fair media is necessary for the continuation of democracy and the safety of all citizens.

Chapter Six: Misinformation during COVID-19

By Edon Ferati and Isabel Gates

Introduction

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has elucidated the grave dangers of misinformation. Misinformation about the virus and safety guidelines has caused extreme consequences not only on the global economy but also on the lives of the general public. This chapter will explore the case studies of Brazil and Italy, two prime examples of countries wrestling with misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. In Brazil, the greatest factors that contributed to misinformation was extreme disregard for factual evidence and narratives spread with political motive by political officials and their supporters through the use of bots, along with a lack of content moderation by media platforms which allowed for the general public to see these differing views and not have the capability of differing facts from fake news. On the other hand, in Italy, the greatest factors that contributed to misinformation was miscommunication between government figures, health officials, and the public that allowed a breeding ground for misinformation to grow and spread as well as regional tensions. Both these countries are prime examples of the dangers of misinformation during a global health crisis and have yielded valuable lessons learned for combating misinformation such as the need for greater content moderation as well as the necessity for clear communication between governments institutions, health officials, and the general public.

Misinformation in Brazil During COVID-19

In the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil is currently second in the world when it comes to COVID-19 deaths, behind only the United States (Statista 2021). Being the sixth most populous country in the world, it has a widely growing economy while also

having one of the largest income inequality rates in the world. Because of this extreme case of income inequality there are large portions of the population throughout Brazil that live in impoverished environments, and such extreme rates of poverty combined with the lack of general medical assistance and gear has been discussed as a major cause for such high rates of death in the country (Cardoso 2020). Nevertheless, another leading cause of the continuous rapid spreading of the novel coronavirus is due to the level of misinformation that is intently spread across social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and more. With much of the information being spread through reasons of political motive towards supporting current far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, one of his main agendas has been downplaying the effects of coronavirus and against social distancing rules/lockdowns (Biancoveille 2020). The problem of spreading misinformation and these companies' pressures of better handling content moderation policies have been around for years, yet over this past year during the pandemic the spread of misinformation has resulted in exceedingly high cases of death, and the pressures of content moderation are at an all-time high.

Ongoing issues of the public's distrust of the spread of misinformation on Brazilian social media platforms is causing companies such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and more to ramp up content moderation, as it has been a dangerous factor in Brazil's fight against COVID-19.

Who spreads the information and how much is it spread?

Problems have progressively risen with trust in the media: a study by the 2020 Reuters Digital News Report found that 84% of respondents in Brazil are concerned about what is legitimate and what is fake in their online content (Tulio dos Santos 2021). This exceptionally high percentage of paranoid news consumers is understandable once analyzing the ample

evidence that's been curated to back these suspicions up.

The main contributors of those spreading false information, especially about coronavirus facts and statistics, have come from political sources that either are directly linked to Bolsonaro or extreme supporters of him (Menn 2020). Much of the information that his supporters spread has been similar to what the U.S. saw with Donald Trump downplaying the effects of coronavirus. When considering the level and portions of Brazilians' presence on social media applications, the influence that information spread can have on such a population is understandable. There are over 141 million social media users in Brazil, which approximates to about 66.5% of the population (Statista 2020). Facebook is Brazil's most popularly used application, with 55% of Brazilian news consumers reporting that it is their primary source of obtaining their news on a daily basis (Statista 2020).

Through the summer of 2020 over 100 Facebook pages and accounts were suspended after being linked to a disinformation campaign in support of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (Harris 2020). Information among these pages and accounts was oriented on downplaying the benefits of social distancing, as well as downplaying the numbers of cases and deaths being reported—all while disregarding the media that supports endorsing COVID-19 precautions. The campaign was later linked to being run by employees of President Bolsonaro along with his two sons, Flavio and Eduardo Bolsonaro, who are also elected officials in Brazil. Researchers at Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab spent time analyzing the activity of these accounts and pages of spread misinformation, and through their studies they had found that five former and current political staffers had also operated these accounts (Menn 2020). Over 80 Instagram accounts have been suspended as well for being part of this Brazilian network. These accounts have amassed over 1.8 million total followers (Menn 2020).

Over 1.35 thousand WhatsApp bots were found spreading news favorable to Bolsonaro (Statista 2019). Once again, this news completely contradicts the knowledge and advice given from WHO and other health and medical experts. Nevertheless, while oftentimes it is the case that statistics are being falsely manipulated, one of the main surface issues is the narrative that the far-right activists are trying to set. This narrative is thoroughly imposed through conspiracies and untruthful stories, such as one posted over the past summer by federal lawmakers with hundreds of thousands of followers, spreading stories such as how local authorities are burying empty coffins to exaggerate the scale of the pandemic and to claim relief funds as well as keep the public under control (Harris 2020). These sorts of conspiracies have been used to escalate the public downplay of coronavirus. Such a spread of conspiracies have further led to peoples strengthened beliefs in such false narratives, which is one of the most dangerous factors of it all.

A study shows that from the beginning of May through the end of the summer of 2020, there was a 10% decrease of satisfactory responses when asked how convinced they were with the government's response to the coronavirus (Gray 2020). This increases difficulties in convincing the public to follow safety protocols and guidelines. Such cause for concern has increased through the Brazilian congress, medical workers, journalists, and a large portion of the regular public who are social media users.

Responses

In the latter half of the past year, some of the largest media platforms have begun to take initiative over the spread of such false information. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all reported taking down multiple posts over the summer in regard to Bolsonaro's false spread of COVID-19 information, citing it as a danger to the public's health (Garcia 2020).

While there have been cases where it seems like Facebook and these other social media

platforms have been able to thoroughly keep the information spread on these apps in check, many believe that this has not been done enough. Brazil's congress this past summer began pushing for legislative action against the mass spreading of fake news on social media by drafting the "Fake News" bill, officially known as the Brazilian Law on Freedom, Responsibility and Transparency bill (Tulio dos Santos 2021). But many believe that this is not the correct answer, for numerous ideals that were supported in the first draft of this bill, such as holding political and federal figures accountable for their spread of misinformation, were later edited out (Maheshwari 2020). Opposing policy makers believe that the bill is too vague and will simply not be enough to hold any users intently spreading fake news accountable (Maheshwari 2020).

After the bevy of cases and deaths over the summer, many media sites/outlets in Brazil grew irate with the overwhelming quantity of fake news spreading. To counter this, they formed a media consortium against the spread of such disinformation campaigns, pledging to monitor the data daily (Biancoville 2020). While there are media outlets and volunteers attempting to assist in the time of false information, it is not easy for this topic to be discussed. In Brazil, press professionals and journalists who oppose the information spread by Bolsonaro and his federal colleagues are consistently attacked on social media, for it has been reported that there are at least 11,000 daily attacks towards these journalists through social media (Garcia 2020).

Misinformation in Italy during COVID-19

On February 21, 2020 the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Italy. The following day, the Italian government isolated the most affected areas. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic status. One of the initial challenges Italy faced during this crisis was countering mass misinformation in order to try to

mitigate the number of infected cases. There were several different reasons for the spread of misinformation including unclear communication and political motives. Poor communication within the Italian government allowed for the spread of misinformation about COVID-19, damaging public trust in the government and media platforms while anti-science movements took advantage of this downfall to spread misinformation about COVID-19. This case study will analyze these factors of the spread of misinformation.

Perhaps one of the greatest factors of misinformation during the COVID-19 crisis in Italy was the ineffective communication between the government, health officials, and the public. The Italian government was caught in the difficult balancing act of informing the public and mitigating the panic. Communication was often ineffective and caused events of unrest, grocery panic-buying, and mass evacuation from cities with quarantine restrictions. Public trust in the Italian government was already low and declined even more dramatically due to the emergence of a health crisis (Edelman 2018). The readability of the information published about COVID-19 contributed to the events of confusion above. In a “study conducted by Szmuda et al. through the use of validated readability tests applied on articles found on the Internet showed that online educational articles on Covid-19 provide information that is too difficult to be understood by the general population. This fatally helps (or even boosts) the spread of false information” (Moscadelli et al. 2020). Moscadelli et al. attributes some of the spread of misinformation to the ability to understand the educational documents that were published by the government. In addition to the difficult-to-read-documents published, the Italian government had a severe decline in trust “with an overall decrease of 21 points in one year, and with government and media being the least trusted institutions” (Lovari 2020). In this study, Italy was only behind the

United States which had a decline in 37 points (Lovari 2020). Ingrained skepticism can lead to mistrust in bodies of work being produced by the government.

In conjunction with this challenge of mistrust in the government, Italy faced disconnected messaging between regional public officials. Starting from February 25, 2020 “a misalignment between regional decisions and government guidelines generated confusion in the management” (Ruiu 2020). One example of this confusion occurred late February when the Lombardy governor held a Facebook Live stream and wore a face mask. However, he was criticized by the scientific community because at that point they deemed that the masks were not necessary and that the mask he wore did not even abide by EU mask standards (Ruiu 2020). At this time, the public did not have clear instructions of guidelines to follow. Mistrust grew when Italian doctors began to talk about the virus on social media and in interviews. In the early stages of discovering a new virus, there are bound to be contradictory research findings. However, these “discordant medical voices were embedded and spectacularized by media logics, becoming spreadable content on digital platforms, often politicized or associated with fake news and conspiracy theories, thus increasing distrust among connected publics” (Lovari 2020). The contradictory messaging about the virus from different sources was part of the root cause of spreading misinformation about the virus. Weak and confusing messages to the public created a breeding ground for misinformation to take root and be spread by bad actors. The Vaccine Confidence Project’s media monitoring found that around “3.08 million messages about COVID-19 were disseminated daily between January and mid-March 2020” (Lovari 2020). Moreover, a study that analyzed misinformation found that 88% of false information and content was spread on social media (Lovari 2020). Many attribute this failure to the Italian government’s inability in providing reliable information to counter the misinformation often associated with contradictory

statements released by independent physicians. Had the Italian government initially set out clear guidelines and kept transparent and clear communication between local authorities, medical professionals, and the public, the uphill battle of fighting misinformation would have been significantly less difficult. Clearer communication would greatly decrease the potential for misinformation to spread.

Unfortunately, lack of clear communication was not the only factor that contributed to the spread of misinformation. Various political motives were another culprit of spreading misinformation in Italy during COVID-19. One political motive was the anti-science and anti-vax movements. Populist parties in Italy have politicized anti-science movements to secure more votes and strengthen their base. The far-right League in Italy has consistently rejected evidence-based policies. In 2017, when the Italian government required vaccinations for children in preschool, many groups rose to opposition like the far-right League and the Five Star Movement. Once these two groups formed a government coalition, they rose to power in 2018 (“Italy Health Czar Resigns and Blames ‘anti-Science’ Government” 2019). The growth of the anti-vaccination movement utilizing social media platforms increased and undermined COVID-19 protocols. When individual physicians began taking to social media to discuss the virus with contradictory statements, misinformation content was falsely legitimized and spread due to the association to medical professionals and the lack of a quick response from the Italian government. Lovari also notes that the credibility of public health institutions have been impacted greatly due to development of digital technologies and the exponential growth of social media. Lovari calls for new communication models that directly relate to the media and interact with the public (Lovari 2020). The article also states that from early January and late March of 2020 on social media, “Coronavirus posts increased to 36% of all messages produced by disinformation sources”

(Lovari 2020). These misinformation sources had ties to conspiracy theories associated with “actors close to Russian and China, aiming to undermine alliances within the European Union when Italy was facing the first phase of the emergency” (Lovari 2020). Digital companies made a commitment to stop misinformation, however a study found that Facebook did not make an adequate effort because “68% of Italian-language misinformation was not labeled to alert users to Covid-19 fake news” (Lovari 2020). In addition to this, “21% of the Italian misinformation posts fell into the category of “harmful content” that Facebook has committed to remove, but these posts were still present in early April” (Lovari 2020). The lack of accountability between the Italian government and these tech companies allowed even more misinformation to be spread.

One final political factor that spread misinformation during COVID-19 concerns regional tensions between the north and south of Italy as well as tensions between smaller municipalities. One example of this is when on February 28, 2020, the President of Veneto, Luca Zaia, said that “I think China has paid a big price for this epidemic because we have all seen them eat live mice or things like that” (Vicaria and Murru n.d.). Italian Twitter users responded with ironic tweets including. Examples include “Well, if people from Veneto eat cats, someone needs to take care of mice” and “We have all seen them-the Vicentini-eat live cats” (Vicaria and Murru n.d.). This is in reference to the fact that people from Vicenza, Veneto (Vientini) are sometimes called “magnagati” which means cat eaters because during World War II people in Vicenza resorted to eating cats. In addition to this, twitter users began to rename Italian cities to resemble cities in China. Sesto San Giovanni was renamed Sesto San Wuhan. Codogno, the first city in Italy to identify the virus, was mocked in various memes for once being unknown to suddenly having global recognition. These problematic twitter jokes and memes spread negative sentiments about

the Italian regions with COVID-19 as well as China and led people to blame those areas for the virus. This subtle form of misinformation shifts the attention to blaming the regions and causes people to push back on health guidelines.

Another more stark example of regional tensions in Italy is between the north and south of Italy. There has been a long-standing tension between the two regions attributed to economic factors where the north has been historically more prosperous. The virus at the beginning disproportionately affected the north of Italy. A meme began to circulate with the face of a political leader of a once secessionist Northern League Party, Matteo Salvini. The slogan of this political campaign is “Prima il Nord!” which means “North first”. The meme that circulated on twitter was a picture of a sad looking Salvini and had text that read “quando il virus ti prende in parola!” which means “when the virus takes you at your words!” (Vicaria and Murru n.d.). These jokes and memes added more kindling to the fire of misinformation causing more tension and polarization between different groups. This again placed blame and shifted focus to attacking the regions instead of clearly communicating health policies.

The political chaos regionally and between health officials distracted from creating and communicating actionable steps the country could take from mitigating the misinformation and controlling the virus. The public already had a low level of trust in government institutions and the trust was further undermined by ineffective communication, misinformation, and political motives.

Conclusion

Taking from the two case studies of Brazil and Italy, it is clear to see that COVID-19 misinformation is a dangerous issue. It is a critical issue that needs to be addressed locally as well as globally since viruses and diseases like COVID-19 do not respect borders. It can be

gathered from Brazil that content moderation is a serious matter after seeing its dangerous effects on a political scale as well as on a healthcare and safety level. While steps have been taken in a vigilant sense as well as with Brazil's congress attempting to pass legislative acts towards clearing misinformation campaigns, Brazil has shown that trust in the media will continue to struggle unless short term and long term responses are set against misinformation campaigns, especially after the major flaws COVID-19 exposed in the public's information sectors. The lessons that can be learned from Italy is that miscommunication can cause misinformation to take root in a population. Had Italy produced clear, concise, and easily understandable information from the beginning and collaborated with local governmental authorities to ensure a consistent message, the spread of misinformation would greatly decrease and would be easier to clarify and eradicate. In the future, Italy, as well as other countries learning from Italy's mistakes, can develop clearer modes of communication and work with social media companies to create collaborative policies to flag possible sources of misinformation.

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