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Digital revolution and fake news

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THE digital revolution and its instantaneous short-term benefits have been celebrated and sold to mankind by peddlers of technology as a blessing in our march towards greater efficiency and productivity. This, it is argued, will fulfil our increasing lust for greater material rewards.

What technopreneurs do not tell us is the negative effects of digital revolution. The negative effects include a black market in computerised extortion, the rise in depression and the spread of fake news. The spread of fake news is insidious because it can wreak havoc in our social and political lives.

It is said that we are living in a post-truth era that is characterised by the eclipse of objective facts. Put in another way, in the post-truth era, objective facts will be less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. What is appalling about the rise of fake news is that we do not have the intellectual tools to differentiate truth from lies.

The digital revolution is witnessing the decline in reading habits among students. In the US, the number of books students read on average declines steadily every year after the second grade. If we do not read and do not have the intellectual capacity to critically assess the information on the internet then we will definitely be taken in by fake news.

If our education system does not provide our students with the ability to locate information in text or make low-level inferences using printed materials then we will witness the rise of lies masquerading as the truth. But what is the truth and how do we determine if a given information is true or false? It is often said that one person's truth is another person's error. Truth is relative. If everyone makes his own truth, no person's idea can be better than another's. All must be equal. And if all ideas are equal, what is the point in researching any subject? Why dig for answers to archaeological questions? Why probe the causes of tension in the Middle East? Why search for a cancer cure? Why explore the galaxy? These activities make sense only if some answers are better than others, if truth is something separate from, and unaffected by, individual perspectives.

The weakness of the digital revolution and the social media is that it has given birth to a generation of children who do not know what they don't know. Truth is essentially what is so about something, the reality of the matter, as distinguished from what people wish were so, believe to be so, or assert to be so.

From another perspective, truth is the view fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate. The word ultimately is important. Investigation may produce a wrong answer for years, even for centuries.

The Man with the Golden Helmet, a well-known and often-reproduced seventeenth-century painting, was for centuries considered the work of Rembrandt.

Only in recent years was it established to be the work of an unknown contemporary of Rembrandt. Though generations of art experts proclaimed the work to be Rembrandt's, the truth remained unaltered.

At various times and places, some very strange ideas were widely accepted as true, for example, the idea that a horsehair turns into a snake when placed in the water.

Even Shakespeare believed this one. The reason people were deceived is obvious to anyone who has observed how refraction of light in water makes any object appear to be moving.

Similarly, many people believed erroneously that small flies, moths, and bees are babies of larger ones.

And history of medicine includes an interesting and often bizarre examples of folk cures – for example, curing a headache by putting a bowl on the head, cutting the hair around the bowl, and then burning the hair; curing an earache by having someone spit tobacco juice into the affected ear, curing pneumonia by cutting live chicken in two and lacing it over the person's lungs; and curing weak vision by piercing the ears.

We laugh at these ideas today, and rightly so. But it is important to realise that our laughter underlines the fact that people do not create truth. If they did, how would scientists ever test theories? The very creation of a theory would be documentation of its validity, and every theory would thus be equally acceptable. This, of course, is nonsense. We know from everyday experience that some theories prove accurate and others inaccurate. The test of a theory's validity must lie outside the theory itself.

In an era where information can travel faster than the speed of sound, the line between truth and lies has been increasingly blurred.

While misinformation has been with us for centuries, the unique problem we face today is how the purveyors of lies are able to use the digital revolution in spreading fake news to the unsuspecting public. Developing a critical mind is the only antidote against the mushrooming of fake news in the post-truth era.

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