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Misinformation

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Introduction

The digital age and the birth of social media have changed how people receive news. New technologies make communicating events an instantaneous process. Generating information is far easier than ever, and the amount of information in the world has grown exponentially since the turn of the millennium. Information constantly generates, making it impossible to process and verify it as it appears. Social media allows people to instantly share information, exposing it to anybody on the same platform. Despite the benefits of sharing information instantly, not all information is truthful. Though they are hardly new concepts, misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news" have become lasting by-products of the current media climate.

Question 1: What are misinformation, disinformation, and "fake news"?

Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are associated terms but distinct concepts. Misinformation is an umbrella term to cover all three, but misinformation is simply false or misleading information. Misinformation leads to false information spreading, regardless of intention. Disinformation generates false information from deliberate and biased narratives, often with political implications. Disinformation is a more malicious form of misinformation created intentionally to serve a purpose, often through propaganda. It utilizes charged messaging and framing to deliver misinformation in a designated manner.

Fake news culminates from misinformation and disinformation, manipulating people's perceptions of the events that construct their reality. Though the term "fake news" originated elsewhere, the phrase garnered broad appeal after former President Donald Trump coined the phrase. Fake news has taken on several meanings; President Trump suggested that fake news is uncomplimentary reporting that is distracting or insignificant, mainly to discredit the success of someone of an opposing ideology. Fake news also derives from political parody, as outlets like The Onion or television shows like The Daily Show can release content shedding a satirical light on political events. These exaggerated interpretations of events can be republished by others as factual reporting, leading to audience misinterpretation. The primary component of fake news is the mimicry of media content without credibility or fact-checking. Despite the vagueness of its true definition, misinformation and disinformation are essential to fake news.

Question 2: Why does misinformation tend to spread?

While we once relied on journalists and news producers to provide the public with information, telecommunications advancements have enabled virtually anybody to spread their thoughts or ideas through the internet. Many people need proper training in checking the credibility of the

information they receive. This lack of education makes discerning whether the news is factual or fabricated problematic. The media is still a piece of the puzzle of misinformation, though, as social media has become the prioritized means of mass media. Social media curates information algorithms based on user preferences, likes, and shares within their feed. This curation creates a system that surrounds people with information that conforms to their interests. Media outlets can generate more news that their audience prefers. If the focus remains on telling the audience what they want to hear, this empowers the media to establish narratives that favor the same positions on issues.

Despite the advancements technology has given us, we need to possess the technology necessary to detect and prevent misinformation at the rate it generates. Despite society moving faster, the human brain processes at the same speed, making it challenging to work at the pace that technological change demands. The average person's attention span continues to shrink, and the screen time of individuals across demographics is increasing. Bite-sized news clips are becoming the norm as they accommodate the busy lifestyle of viewers, but these clips lack the nuance to provide proper context to events. Headlines are the best news source for many, as they have less time and less incentive to digest long-form reading. If false information enters the pipeline, it corrupts the media and the public. Media critic, Tom Rosenstiel, identifies the problem this way: "Misinformation is not like a plumbing problem you fix. It is a social condition, like crime, that you must constantly monitor and adjust to." While people within the media must create an ethical and reliable environment for information exchange, all internet users and media consumers are responsible for being scrupulous readers. It takes a collective effort to prevent misinformation and ensure that the information given to the public is trustworthy.

Question 3: How does the spread of misinformation affect the current political climate in the United States?

An informed and engaged public is crucial to a functioning democracy. Free media plays a key role in producing a well-informed public. Misinformation curtails civil discussion and interaction between people of diverse understandings. An unfortunate consequence of social media's focus on curated news has been the creation of echo chambers. Echo chambers occur when people repeatedly expose themselves to the same information. Repeated exposure causes people to confirm their beliefs through a forum that fails to provide room for rebuttal or argument of differing thoughts or ideas. The system is a potentially dangerous environment for exchanging ideas as people begin to hear exclusively from like-minded individuals. It creates a cycle of confirming our biases and struggles to understand people of differing ideologies or beliefs. As individuals fail to socialize with people of diverse interests, groups struggle to understand each other. This problem becomes a direct cause of political and social polarization.

The media is a profit-driven industry, meaning that what generates the most viewership is what emphasizes priority in reporting. Social media's assent has seen national corporate media shape how news is delivered and influences how communities influence their own local media. Sensationalized stories with dramatic narratives are more compelling to viewers than "just the facts" reporting. All media outlets have an agenda to solicit subscriptions or "clicks," which can

cause a bias toward sensationalism of varying degrees in the news. This sensationalism often couples with the problems associated with misinformation. The spectacle takes priority over the context. The American populace and the media join in their efforts to resist this temptation and work to find solutions to limit misinformation. It is the responsibility of all who encounter misinformation to prevent it. We cannot be satisfied with a media market that further divides our nation and causes social disorder. If trust in the media declines, so does our faith in democracy.

Parting Thoughts

It is essential to emphasize smart searching and safe scrolling in the digital age. It can be challenging to discern what is fact from fiction on the internet. As a nation that prides itself on having an educated populace, the United States must ensure that it searches for ways to limit the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Our technology in the 21st century is only helpful if the brilliant minds that use it can do so in effective, efficient, and ethical ways. Information monitoring and misinformation prevention technologies may be the key to helping us continue to use the internet to its fullest potential.

For Further Reading

ICAPP encourages readers to seek out ways to learn more about the dangers of misinformation and how people can protect themselves from it. The following sources may be helpful for further reading on how you can ensure the news you read is reliable.

https://www.harvard.edu/in-focus/managing-misinformation/

https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/news-habits-media/media-society/misinformation/n

https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=345925&p=7772376

https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation

https://library.csi.cuny.edu/misinformation