MEDIA/DIGITAL LITERACY IN AN ERA OF DISINFORMATION

Date: November 25, 2022

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KEY EVENTS

On November 25, 2022, Dr. Heidi Tworek, Associate Professor of International History and Public Policy at the University of British Columbia, presented *Media/Digital Literacy in an Era of Disinformation*. The key points discussed were the differences between misinformation and disinformation, how misinformation and online abuse overlap, and the initiatives to address mis/disinformation in Canada.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The central theme throughout Dr. Tworek's presentation was how mis/disinformation and online abuse impact professional communicators. Several initiatives being undertaken to address mis/disinformation were also discussed.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Tworek began her presentation by describing the difference between misinformation and disinformation and how they relate to online abuse. She noted that misinformation is information that is misleading or false, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the people who are sharing it mean to cause harm. They may not realize that what they're sharing is incorrect or low quality. Disinformation on the other hand, is deliberately spread by malign actors with some sort of harmful aim. These actors could have a political motivation, such as Russian interference, or economic motivation.

Further into the presentation, Dr. Tworek referred to her own research to expand on how misinformation and disinformation overlap with online abuse. She noted that they are often handled as separate phenomena when they actually have much in common. Those who are being abused online are often being abused with disinformation about themselves. For example, health communicators during COVID were often targeted online by people spreading disinformation about their motives which damaged their credibility.

This type of online harassment is not specific to health communicators, and it is actually a broad phenomenon within Canadian professional groups. Surveys conducted by Ipsos and CBC in 2021 found that 65% of journalists had experienced online harassment, which was much more frequent than any other form of abuse or harassment (Ipsos, 2021). Furthermore, those who had intersectional identities, such as members of the LGBTQ2+ community, suffered even greater levels of online harassment.

Scientists have experienced similar abuse online as a result of mis/disinformation being spread about their work. Studies conducted by *Nature* and *Science* journals found that approximately 60% of respondents from the scientific community experienced an attack on their credibility, 40% experienced emotional distress, 30% reported reputational damage, and 15% received death threats. Dr. Tworek noted that this becomes a significant problem when looking at digital literacy, because practitioners and academics in positions to provide high-quality information are being subjected to increased amounts of abuse and may begin to retreat from the online space.

Dr. Tworek stressed that it is tremendously important to understand how professional communicators can be supported, and discussed some of the challenges and recent initiatives being undertaken in Canada to address them. The first challenge is a lack of data on diversity in the media. Individuals are more likely to seek information from people who have similar characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences to themselves, so a good way to address mis/disinformation would be to have high quality information being reported by diverse professionals. The problem is that there is little data on gender diversity or which people are being quoted in the media, so it is difficult to ascertain where the gaps are. To begin to address this issue, Maite Taboada, a researcher at SFU created the Gender Gap Tracker which looked at the percentage of women being quoted in various newspapers. There is still a lack of data on this issue, but initiatives such as this are promising for future progress.

A second challenge noted by Dr. Tworek is the lack of explanatory journalism. One reason people are becoming more susceptible to mis/disinformation is that it is difficult to find credible and accessible information. Some information is hard to access for the general public and can be communicated in such a way that it's difficult to comprehend. Part of the problem is that academics are trained to write academic papers and may be hesitant to adjust their style of writing to appeal to the general public. In Canada, there is an online publishing initiative called *The Conversation* (https://theconversation.com/ca)*,* which is a space for academics to work with journalists to write pieces about their research that are more accessible for a broader public. This initiative helps to ensure that high quality information is being put out in an accessible way at no cost to the public.

A final challenge discussed by Dr. Tworek is social media. Professionals publishing high-quality information often lack social media expertise, which makes it difficult to effectively share their information. One solution to address this issue is an initiative called ScienceUpFirst (https://www.scienceupfirst.com/), which is a movement against mis/disinformation that is evidence-based and social media focused. Instead of trying to counter mis/disinformation, ScienceUpFirst puts out high-quality information from independent scientists, researchers, healthcare experts, and science communicators in ways that are easy to share and easy to comprehend. Furthermore, the information published isn't attributed to any specific author, which helps to shield professional communicators from online abuse.

To conclude, Dr. Tworek emphasized that mis/disinformation is a systemic problem; however, there are many steps we can take to improve the information environment. She stressed the importance of shielding individual authors from online abuse by having institutions put out high-quality information that is accessible and easy to share.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- The primary difference between misinformation and disinformation is the motivation behind the communication. Misinformation is misleading or false information that isn't purposely meant to deceive the readers, whereas disinformation is deliberately spread by malign actors with some sort of harmful aim.
- There is an overlap between mis/disinformation and online abuse. Professionals who publish high-quality information can often be targeted

with mis/disinformation about their own motivations, which can damage their credibility.

- Online abuse appears to be prevalent among professional communicators within Canada and globally. Various studies show high levels of online harassment among journalists, scientists, and health communicators.

- Online abuse of professional communicators is further complicated by intersectional identities. For example, journalists who are part of the LGBTQ2+ community faced even greater levels of online harassment than the majority of journalists.

- There are several initiatives in Canada to address mis/disinformation, including: tracking diversity in the media through the Gender Gap Tracker, making high-quality information more accessible through outlets such as *The Conversation*, and improving the reach of high-quality information by making it easier to share and digest on social media through initiatives like ScienceUpFirst.

References

Ipsos. (2021, November 19). *Online harm in journalism.* https://www.ipsos. com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/202111/Online_Harm_in_Jou rnalism-Report-2021-11-09-v1.pdf