Journalism and Misinformation

Supply, Demand, Scale

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Situation

- Too much misinformation comes from traditional media.
- Journalism is an attack surface—and part of the solution.
- Media literacy—the demand side—is vital.
Obligatory reminder...
This isn’t new.
Current conditions in journalism

- Amplifiers for deceit
- Often unaware of being used
  - Inadequate detection and response
- 24-hour news cycle => 1,400-minute news cycle
- Major financial challenges
Among journalism’s pretenses:

- Our work speaks for itself.
- We got the whole story.
- If we ever covered it, you have the context.
- Even though breaking news is inherently flawed, trust us anyway.
Hypothesis:
People get more misinfo from traditional media than social media*

*This needs serious research!
“The most worrisome misinformation in U.S. politics remains the old-fashioned kind: false and misleading statements made by elected officials who dominate news coverage and wield the powers of government.”

--Brendan Nyhan, Dartmouth College
But this *is* new (or at least recent):

The disinformation-technical-political-industrial complex.
7 TYPES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

- **Satire or Parody**: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.
- **Misleading Content**: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.
- **Imposter Content**: When genuine sources are impersonated.
- **Fabricated Content**: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.
- **False Connection**: When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content.
- **False Context**: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
- **Manipulated Content**: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

Source: First Draft
And it will get much, much worse...

Fake Obama speech is the beginning of the end of video evidence
Journalism is a key attack surface.
Deceitful people:

- Hack journalistic norms
  - “Both sides”
- Provide ratings/clickbait catnip ($$$)
  - e.g. Trump in 2015-16
- Trick news orgs into running outright BS
  - e.g. scientific “studies” paid for by vested interests
- Leverage technology and networks to promote false memes
  - “It’s out there.”
Hacking journalistic norms

It's raining.

It's not raining.

Democrats say it’s raining.

Republicans disagree.
"It May Not Be Good for America, but It's Damn Good for CBS"

-- Les Moonves, CBS CEO

(February, 2016)
How Theranos used the media to create the emperor’s new startup

*John Naughton*

With £1bn and a pretty face, fraudster Elizabeth Holmes blinded some of the most respected journalists in the industry.

▲ Elizabeth Holmes falsely promised to revolutionise the blood-testing industry. Photograph: Courtesy of Theranos
"...web of conspiracy theorists, Russian operatives, Trump campaigners and Twitter bots who manufactured the ‘news’ that Hillary Clinton ran a pizza-restaurant child-sex ring.”
Journalists need to:

- Understand how they’re being used
  - Don’t chase the latest shiny objects
- Rethink some traditional norms
  - ...such as amplifying falsehoods
- Learn math/statistics
  - Put risk in context
- Fill “data voids” with trustworthy info
- And that’s just for starters...
The Oxygen of Amplification
Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators

Whitney Phillips
Dear Journalists, Stop Being Loudspeakers for Liars

An open letter to newsrooms everywhere

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who is paid to lie for the Trump administration. Photo: Alex Wong/ Getty
America's Faulty Perception of Crime Rates

America's crime rates are at their lowest point in decades. So why do so many Americans think crime is going up?
But no mention of news (and entertainment) media’s role in fueling fear...
Caution: The “Do Something!” Brigades

Opinion

The Poison on Facebook and Twitter Is Still Spreading

Social platforms have a responsibility to address misinformation as a systemic problem, instead of reacting to case after case.

By The Editorial Board

The editorial board represents the opinions of the board, its editor and the publisher. It is separate from the newsroom and the Op-Ed section.
The New Editors of the Internet

In a small number of Silicon Valley conference rooms, decisions are being made about what people should and shouldn’t see online—without the accountability or culture that has long accompanied that responsibility.

Do what, exactly?
We can’t just upgrade supply. We have to upgrade *us.*

At scale.
One way to help improve demand: media/news literacy

It needs journalism’s help.

(And yours...)

**Media literacy:** The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act on media messages in all forms.

**News literacy:** Applying these critical thinking skills in the context of news information.

*Consuming and creating media with integrity is key*

“News fluency”
Part of a combination of related “literacies”

- Information
- Digital
- Media
- News
- Network

- plus

- Data (math, stats, etc.)
- Science
- and more...
Improving demand:

Who’s responsible?
How do we make it scale?
Educators at all levels
Principles for “Consumers”

- Be skeptical
- Use judgment
- Ask questions
- Challenge assumptions
- Understand how media work
Media—including news organizations

Wikimedia Commons, Pixabay
Principles for “Creators”

- Thoroughness
- Accuracy
- Fairness
- Independence
- **Transparency**: first step in bringing news literacy principles to audience
Introducing the Transparency Project
Technology companies
Why tech platforms should give users more control — and how they can do it
Collaborate.
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