Information Disorder: Understanding propaganda techniques during a war infodemic

Module 3: Media Literacy

Contents

Content and Source Evaluation

Duration: 90 min

(New) Media Literacy – Brief Introduction

You can present the following video (or a similar one) as an introduction

The New Media Literacies https://youtu.be/pEHcGAsnBZE

Discussion: What do you think Media Literacy is?

Definitions of (New) Media Literacy

"Media Literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms."
(Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute, 1992)

"Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy."
(Center for Media Literacy)

Media Literacy does NOT mean "don't watch;" it means "watch carefully, think critically."

Handout: You can also provide the Language of Media Literacy: A Glossary of Terms by Derek Boles

Activity 1: To Share or Not to Share

Today, many people "like" or "share" a message after only a quick scan of the headline and image. They may choose to share content because it may be pleasurable or give them status among their social networks. But when people share content without first reading, viewing, or considering it, they can contribute to the spread of propaganda, fake news and stereotypes. We should "think before we share."

1. Gather some propaganda/fake news or stereotypical representation examples content (related to conflict situations or a war) from social media that you feel comfortable sharing.
2. Present the examples and explain that many people do not make careful decisions about whether "to share or not to share." They might share online content automatically without too much thinking. They might share, for example, when their strong feelings are activated. But before sharing, we should first review the message carefully, understand it, and reflect on its value to us and its value to the people in our social networks.

Ask the participants to review them and to think whether they are VERY willing to share with their social network or NOT and to provide a rating on the "beneficial-to-harmful" scale (Likert Scale: 0-5, 0: harmful / 5: beneficial).

Discuss the examples and reflect on the participants' experiences: Why are some examples hurtful? Why are some beneficial? To whom are they beneficial or hurtful? Have you ever shared something that you later regretted? Showcase the elements in the examples that indicate unreliable information and stereotypical representation.

Be a Critical Thinker

The amount of information we are receiving daily can easily lead a person to become intellectually lazy. Nowadays, it is important not to become a passive consumer of news and other data. Instead, it is important, more than ever, to make efforts to keep our critical thinking skills sharp:

- ✓ Challenging our own assumptions and biases
- ✓ Using a combination of our own experience as well as data that has proven to be true
- ✓ Validating ideas and opinions

INVESTIGATING

guides · uncovers

INFORMATION

Provides · Creates expectations

VERIFYING
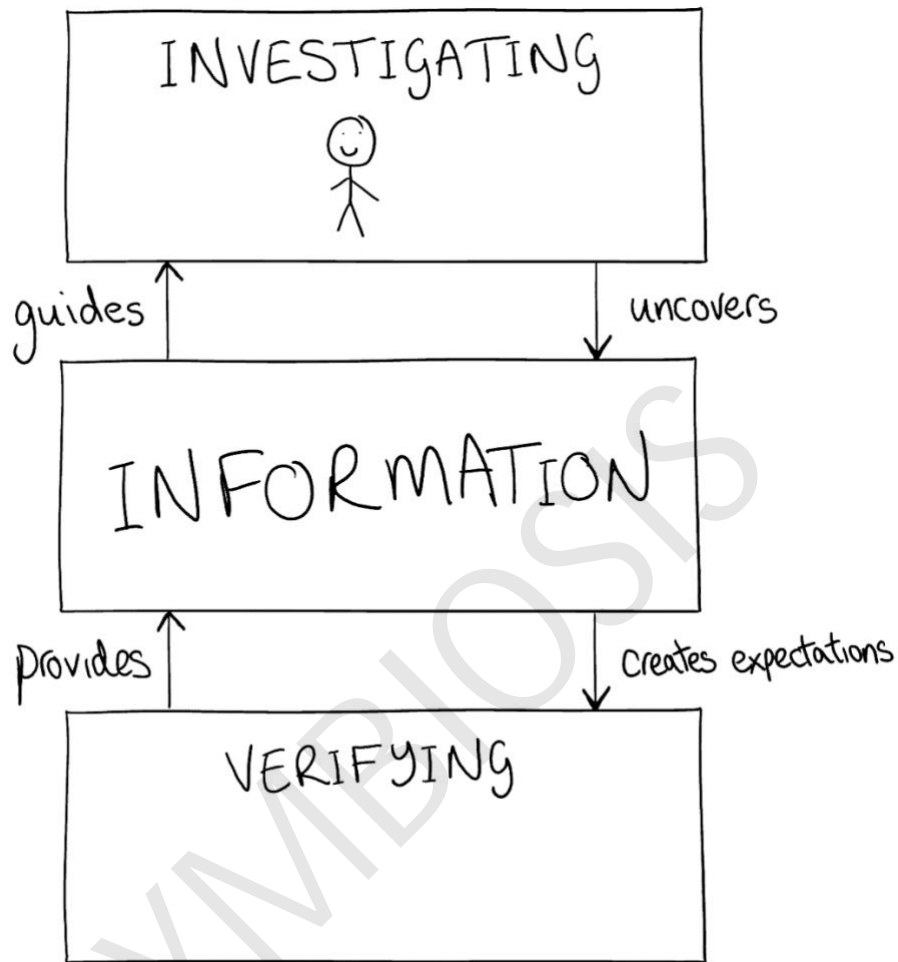
Source: Dan Ashby

Handout: Provide 'The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking' by globaldigitalcitizen.org

global digital
citizen foundation

The Ultimate Cheatsheet for
Critical Thinking

Want to exercise critical thinking skills? Ask these questions whenever you discover or discuss new information. These are broad and versatile questions that have limitless applications!

Who

... benefits from this?
... is this harmful to?
... makes decisions about this?
... is most directly affected?
... have you also heard discuss this?
... would be the best person to consult?
... will be the key people in this?
... deserves recognition for this?

What

... are the strengths/weaknesses?
... is another perspective?
... is another alternative?
... would be a counter-argument?
... is the best/worst case scenario?
... is most/least important?
... can we do to make a positive change?
... is getting in the way of our action?

Where

... would we see this in the real world?
... are there similar concepts/situations?
... is there the most need for this?
... in the world would this be a problem?
... can we get more information?
... do we go for help with this?
... will this idea take us?
... are the areas for improvement?

When

... is this acceptable/unacceptable?
... would this benefit our society?
... would this cause a problem?
... is the best time to take action?
... will we know we've succeeded?
... has this played a part in our history?
... can we expect this to change?
... should we ask for help with this?

Why

... is this a problem/challenge?
... is it relevant to me/others?
... is this the best/worst scenario?
... are people influenced by this?
... should people know about this?
... has it been this way for so long?
... have we allowed this to happen?
... is there a need for this today?

How

... is this similar to _____?
... does this disrupt things?
... do we know the truth about this?
... will we approach this safely?
... does this benefit us/others?
... does this harm us/others?
... do we see this in the future?
... can we change this for our good?

globaldigitalcitizen.org

Activity 2: Critical Thinking Test

Ask participants to select one narrative related to conflict situations or a war and analyse it following the questions below:

1. Provide a short description of the narrative (what's the story?) and some examples (e.g. links, photos, etc.)
2. What is the main intention?
3. What type of behaviour does it encourage?
4. Where, how and by whom is the narrative disseminated?
5. What is the social, political, economic… context?
6. Possible reasons for the emergence/persistence of the oppressive narrative?
7. What is the potential impact?
   a. Individual targeted
   b. Group targeted
   c. Community
8. What are the responses given to it from different actors (individuals, groups, institutions, organisations, etc.) to it?

Upon completion reflect in a group discussion on their results and use 'The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking' by globaldigitalcitizen.org to facilitate the procedure.

Ways to recognize accuracy and reliability

Duration: 90 min

How to Spot Fake News Techniques (Source: FactCheck.org)

When one of the most active online hoaxer was asked on the fake pieces he puts online and his material gets quite a number of views, the respond was that *"They just keep passing stuff around. Nobody fact-checks anything anymore."* Paul Horner

Critical thinking is a key skill in media and information literacy.
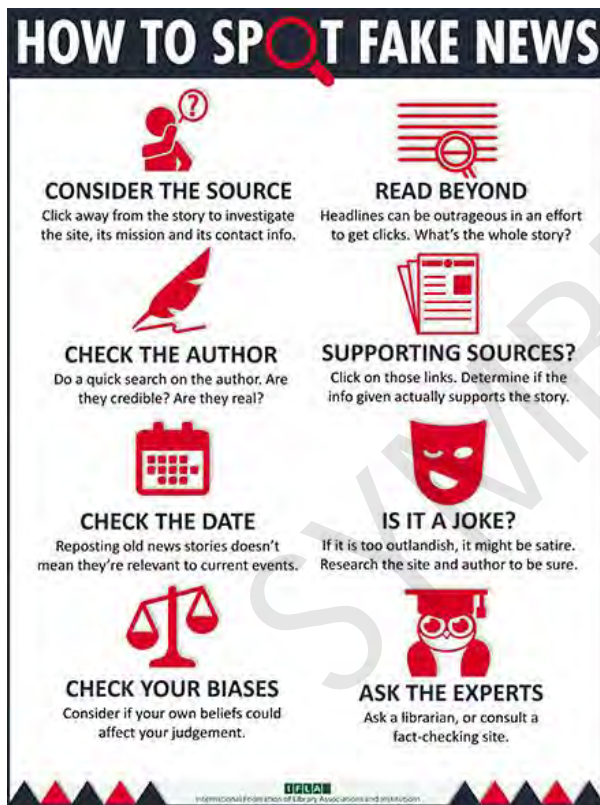
Infographics credit to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA.org)

Source: AASCU.org

Consider the source

You can check a source through the online created resources. If a claim or story cannot be verified by a fact-checking site, it shall not be believed or used, and the site shall be ignored or even debunked.

Source-Checking v. Fact-Checking

When assessing the credibility of a piece of information, the source who originally created the content or first shared it, can provide the strongest evidence about whether something is accurate.

Newsrooms, and people relying on social media for information, need to be investigating the source, almost before they look at the content itself.

Newsrooms in particular need more powerful tools to be able to visually map online networks and connections to understand how dis-information is being created, spread and amplified.

Fact checking resources
International Fact Checking Network
EU East StratCom Task Force
Storyful.com
AllSides.com
Snopes.com
PolitEcho.org
Flipfeed
Rbutr.com

Present the following video (or a similar one) by BTN Media Literacy

"Which News Sources Can be Trusted?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGVExHBXQBs

Read beyond... the headline

If a provocative headline draw your attention, read a little further before you decide to share the shocking information. Even in legitimate news stories, the headline does not always tell the whole story. But fake news can include several revealing signs in the text.

Check the author

Another sign of a fake news is often the byline. Who is the author? Does the byline exist at all? Check whether the name of the author is real. If any of the prizes are claimed to credit the author and/or the resource – that also can be easily checked.

Check the date

Some false stories are not completely fake, but rather distortions of real events. These mendacious claims can take a legitimate news story and twist what it says — or even claim that something that happened long ago is related to current events. Check, again, the support of these stories.

Check supporting sources

Many times, these bogus stories will cite official - or official-sounding - sources, but once you look into it, the source does not back up the claim. It can be either a piece of legislation, or an official statistical data, which is usually easily and publicly available.

Is it a Joke?

Remember, there is such thing as satire. Normally, it is clearly labeled as such, and sometimes it is even funny. But not everyone gets the jokes. And then there is the more debatable forms of satire, designed to pull one over on the reader.

These type of posts — whether termed satire or simply "fake news" — are designed to encourage clicks, and generate money for the creator through ad revenue, which might be the source for the living to some of them.

Check your biases

Bias is hard to avoid, but it can be really damaging - leading us to make poor choices without fairly weighing up the facts.

Confirmation bias leads people to put more stock in information that confirms their beliefs and discount information that does not. But the next time you are automatically appalled at some Facebook post concerning, say, a politician you oppose, take a moment to check it out.

Try this simple test: What other stories have been posted to the "news" website that is the source of the story that just popped up in your Facebook feed?

Consult the experts

We know you are busy, and some of this debunking takes time. But experts get paid to do this kind of work. Between FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, the *Washington Post* Fact Checker and PolitiFact.com, it is likely at least one has already fact-checked the latest viral claim to pop up in your news feed.

The C.R.A.A.P. Test (Source: Medium)

Evaluating Sources with CRAAP

C Currency - the timeliness of information
When was the information published or posted? Has the information been revised or updated? Is the information current or out of date? Are the links functional?

R Relevance - the importance of the information for your needs
Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question? Who is the intended audience? Is the information at an appropriate level? Have you looked at a variety of sources?

A Authority - the source of the information
Who is the author/ publisher/ source/ sponsor? Are the author's credentials or organisational affiliations given, and what are they? What are the author's qualifications?

A Accuracy - the reliability, truthfulness, & correctness of the content
Where does the information come from? Is it supported by evidence? Has it been reviewed? Can you verify any of the information in another source? Does the language seem unbiased?

P Purpose - the reason the information exists
What is the purpose of the information? Do the author's sponsors make their intentions clear? Is this information fact/ opinion/ propaganda? Is it objective, impartial & unbiased?

Currency — Is the information you want to use **still relevant**?

One may assume that any information published by well-known authors, such as Ivy league institutions e.g. Harvard University, MIT, or the University of California at Berkeley is correct but it is equally important to check **when** it was published.

Relevance — Is the information you've discovered **about** what you are researching?

There are so many aspects that can be studied about one topic. You want to make sure that you are keeping your focus on exactly what your research question is asking for.

If you are researching farming, you could look at the economics, the agriculture, the biology, the genetics, the chemistry, the history, the geography, the sociology, or even the fashion side of farming.

Are you picking a source that is relevant to what you are trying to answer?

Authority — **Who** is telling you this information?

Reputable newspapers, like *The New York Times*, are usually reliable sources, but not always!

Opinion pieces (example: https://www.nytimes.com/section/opinion), for example, are just that — opinions. Most major magazines and newspapers have these, and they aren't necessarily backed up by facts, or research. Be careful that what they are stating can be verified by other sources that have done studies to confirm these findings.

Consider who is responsible for the content, not just who the source of the information is.

Accuracy — Do you think the information is correct?

You need to take a minute to evaluate what you are reading. Even if the author sounds convincing and the information is published in a book, does it seem plausible?

Purpose — **Why** was this information created?

This can be a tricky one to investigate, but it is important to check who is responsible for this information. Do they have another motive to come to a particular conclusion?

What is a native ad? This could appear to be a research article, but in fact the author is being paid, or is in some way affiliated with the corporation that produces that product. They will have a huge bias in the information that they put out because they want you to support whatever it is they are promoting.

Articles are sometimes written to promote specific products and are paid to do so. In this example Forbes magazine is promoting financial institutions, like Fidelity Investments by writing convincing articles about these products that sound like they are just opinion pieces.

Handout: Evaluating Information – Applying the CRAAP Test
https://library.csuchico.edu/sites/default/files/craap-test.pdf

Activity 3: Article Evaluation

In this activity participants evaluate articles (the trainer selects a number of articles) and verify their credibility, using the techniques that they have learned. They can work individually or in teams.

Ask them to evaluate the articles and rank each of the following 6 questions from 1 to 4 (1: unreliable, 4: excellent):

- ✓ **Currency:** When was the information written & last updated?
- ✓ **Reliability:** Where did the author get this information?

- ✓ **Authority of Author:** Who is responsible for the information?
- ✓ **Authority of Organisation:** Does the resource have a reputable organisation behind it?
- ✓ **Accuracy:** Do you think the information is correct?
- ✓ **Purpose/Point of View:** Does the information seem fairly represented, or is it biased?

After they've completed this step reflect on the articles together. Facilitate the procedure using the following questions as applied to the examples:

- ✓ The message: What is the topic or informational content of the information and ideas being expressed?
- ✓ Techniques: What symbols and rhetorical strategies are used to attract audience attention and activate emotional response?
- ✓ Environment: Where, when and how is this message usually encountered by people?
- ✓ Context: Is the speech dangerous? Or Could it incite violence towards others?
- ✓ Means of Communication & Format: What is the genre of the message and how does this particular form influence audiences?
- ✓ Audience Receptivity: How are people likely to think and how free do you think they are to accept or reject it?
- ✓ Stereotypes: Does the article affect the way we see the topic?
- ✓ Goals of the speech: Is it deliberately intended to cause harm to others?

What does the score mean?

- 18 to 24 points: Excellent source for research.
- 13 to 17 points: Good source for a research paper or academic project. Confirm with other sources.
- 7 to 12 points: Useful for ideas or casual projects. Do not cite as a reference for a research paper or project.
- 0 to 6 points: Highly questionable source

The dark side of Social Media and ways to cope with

Duration: 60 min

<u>Some areas of impact</u>

Politics

A [new study](#) from Pew Research claims that about one in five U.S. adults gets their political news primarily through social media. The study also finds that those who do get their political news primarily through social media tend to be less well-informed and more likely to be exposed to unproven claims that people who get their news from traditional sources.

Social networks play an increasingly important role in electoral politics — first in the ultimately unsuccessful candidacy of Howard Dean in 2003, then in the election of the first African-American president in 2008, and again in the Twitter-driven campaign of Donald Trump.

The [New York Times reports](#) that "The election of Donald J. Trump is perhaps the starkest illustration yet that across the planet, social networks are helping to fundamentally rewire human society." Because social media allows people to communicate more freely, they are helping to create surprisingly influential social organizations among once-marginalized groups.

Society

Almost a quarter of the world's population is now on Facebook. Because social networks feed off interactions among people, they become more powerful as they grow.

Thanks to the internet, each person with marginal views can see that he's not alone. And when these people find one another via social media, they can do things — create memes, publications, and entire online worlds that bolster their worldview, and then break into the mainstream.

Without social media, social, ethical, environmental, and political ills would have minimal visibility. Increased visibility of issues has shifted the balance of power from the hands of a few to the masses.

However, social media is slowly killing real activism and replacing it with 'slacktivism'

While social media activism brings an increased awareness about societal issues, questions remain as to whether this awareness is translating into real change. Some argue that social sharing has encouraged people to use computers and mobile phones to express their concerns on social issues without actually having to engage actively with campaigns in real life. Their support is limited to pressing the 'Like' button or sharing content.

(Source: [Simplilearn](#), 2022)

<u>The technological 'army' of misinformation</u> (adapted from the Media and Information Disorder Master Class and F. Menczer & T. Hills, 2020)

Trolls

Trolls provoke emotions by publicly offending their targets. Trolls are humans who post behind a username or handle. Yet, similar to bots, they can amplify dis-information in coordinated ways to evoke

conformity among others. What they do better than bots is target those who question the veracity of a piece of information. Trolls work efficiently to silence naysayers in the early stages of dis-information distribution by posting personal attacks to undermine that person's position on the board.

Fake tanks

Fake tanks may also be referred to as partisan bodies disguised as think tanks. As Transparify explaines *"[T]hese [fake tanks] range from essentially fictitious entities purposefully set up to promote the very narrow agenda and vested interests of (typically one single) hidden funder at one extreme, to more established organisations that work on multiple policy issues but (occasionally or routinely) compromise their intellectual independence and research integrity in line with multiple funders' agendas and vested interests...".*

Representatives from fake tanks *"regularly appear on television, radio, or in newspaper columns to argue for or against certain policies, their credibility bolstered by the abuse of the think tank label and misleading job titles such as "senior scholar."*

Bots

An agent, using an automation for spreading misleading information, may be considered to be a bot. Currently, machines are poor at creating dis-information, but they can efficiently publish and distribute it. Recent research by Shao and colleagues concluded that "[a]ccounts that actively spread mis-information are significantly more likely to be bots." They also found that bots are "particularly active in the early spreading phases of viral claims, and tend to target influential users." (C. Shao, G.L. Ciampaglia, O. Varol, A. Flammini, & F. Menczer, 2017).

Bots can manipulate majority-oriented platform algorithms to gain vast visibility and can create conformity among human agents who would then further distribute their messages. Many bots are designed to amplify the reach of dis-information and exploit the vulnerabilities that stem from our cognitive and social biases. They also create the illusion that several individuals have independently come to endorse the same piece of information.

As a recent report on computational amplification by Gu et al. (2017) concluded: "A properly designed propaganda campaign is designed to have the appearance of peer pressure - bots pretending to be humans, guru accounts that have acquired a positive reputation in social media circles - these can make a propaganda campaign-planted story appear to be more popular than it actually is." Despite the platforms' public commitment to stifle automated accounts, bots continue to amplify certain messages, hashtags or accounts, creating the appearance of certain perspectives being popular and, by implication, true. Returning to the discussion around agents' motivations, these examples show the power of social and psychological motivations for creating and disseminating mis- and dis-information. Being a part of the tribe is a powerful, motivating force.

It was also concluded that foreign-language sources on social networks are policed and moderated much less effectively than English-language sources (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

Echo Chambers

Most people do not believe that they follow the herd. But our confirmation bias leads us **to follow others who are like us**, a dynamic that is sometimes referred to as **homophily—a tendency for like-minded people to connect with one another.**

Social media amplifies homophily by allowing users to alter their social network structures through following, unfriending, and so on. **The result is that people become segregated into large, dense and increasingly misinformed communities commonly described as echo chambers.**
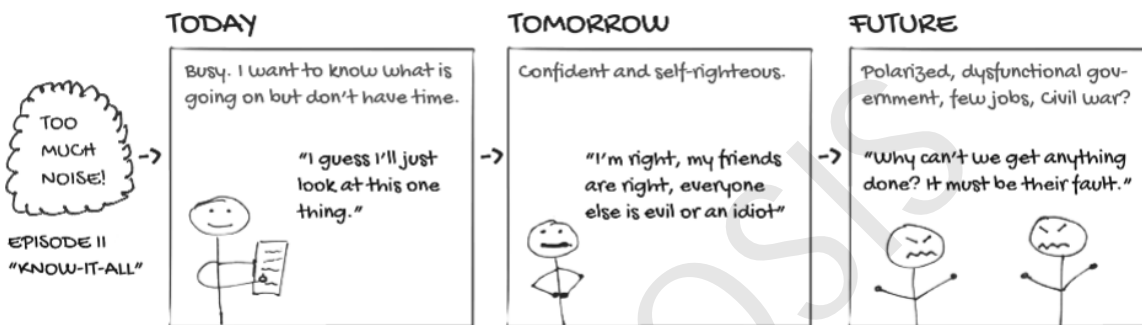
Source: AllSides.com

Echo Chambers provide safe spaces for sharing beliefs and worldviews with others, with little fear of confrontation or division. They allow people to 'perform' their identities as shaped by their worldviews with others who share those worldviews. The platforms have capitalized on these human tendencies, knowing they would encourage users to spend more time on their sites. People who will interpret their messages are much less likely to have an 'oppositional' (rejecting the way the message was encoded) or 'negotiated' (accepting only some aspects of the message) reading. As such, agents target groups that they know are more likely to be receptive to the message. If they are successful in doing that, it is very likely the message will then be shared by the initial recipient.

Using algorithms to deliver content that we are mostly likely to enjoy, these platforms reinforce our worldviews and allow us to stay encased in our safe, comfortable echo chambers.

Filter Bubbles

Filter bubbles are a result of algorithms that choose content based on previous online behavior, as with search histories or online shopping activity (E. Bakshy, S. Messing, & L.A. Adamic, 2015).

A filter bubble occurs when someone is only exposed to news that confirms his or her beliefs, or when an individual solely interacts with like-minded peers. The result? A society where people only see one side, leading to a highly polarized political environment (AllSides.com, 2018).

Filter bubbles may specifically have an impact on:

a) **Customization of feed and search algorithms.** Users may not be given the chance to consciously change the algorithms that populate their social feeds and search results.

b) **Diversification of exposure to different people and views.** Using the existing algorithmic technology on the social networks that provides suggestions for pages, accounts, or topics to follow, these are designed to provide exposure to different types of content and people.

c) **Consumption of information privately.** Even though technology companies provide more options for users to consume content privately, instead of publicizing everything they 'like' or 'follow, there is still risk to performative influences on information consumption.

d) **Terminology used by the social networks.** Three common concepts of the social platforms unconsciously affect how we avoid different views and remain in our echo chambers. 'To follow', for most people subconsciously implies a kind of agreement, so it emotionally creates a resistance against exposure to diverse opinion. 'Friend' also connotes a type of bond you wouldn't want to have with those you strongly disagree with but are curious about. There is no neutral labels such as connecting to someone, subscribing to a publication, bookmarking a story, etc. instituted.

Challenges of filter bubbles and echo chambers

As *Wired* dramatically concluded in an article just after the US election, "[t]he global village that was once the internet has been replaced by digital islands of isolation that are drifting further apart each day. From your Facebook feed to your Google Search, as your experience online grows increasingly personalized, the internet's islands grow farther apart." (M. El-Bermawy, 2016).

There has also been research that challenges the ideas about the dangers of echo chambers. A survey of 14,000 people in seven countries that was published in May 2017 (W.H. Dutton et al., 2017) concluded that "people who are interested and involved in politics online are more likely to double-check questionable information they find on the internet and social media, including by searching online for additional sources in ways that will pop filter bubbles and break out of echo chambers." (B. Dutton, 2017).

In addition, the 2017 Digital News Report, published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, concluded, "Echo chambers and filter bubbles are undoubtedly real for some, but we also find that – on average – users of social media, aggregators and search engines experience more diversity than non-users." (N. Newman, 2017).

Concerns raised since Brexit and the US election have led to new innovations by social platforms, third-party organizations and academic institutions to help people 'prick' their filter bubbles. With the renewed emphasis on scaling news literacy programs globally, teaching how social algorithms produce these filter bubbles should be a crucial part of any standardized curriculum.

We have to think about information consumption from a ritual as well as transmission perspective. If we recognize that people seek out and consume content for many reasons beyond simply becoming informed – like feeling connected to similar people or affiliating with a specific identify – it means that pricking the filter bubble requires more than simply providing diverse information.

The listed challenges are suggested to be faced with new labels to identify different types of content on social platforms, systematic programs for taking down bot accounts, the integration of critical media literacy programs in schools and best practices for making fact-checks and debunks shareable.

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