

The Questions

Issues in Contemporary Ethics: Disinformation

At a Glance

Social media has become a source of news and information for people around the world. Unfortunately, this has led to the amplification of misinformation and disinformation on social media. While misinformation is defined as false information that is not created with the intention of causing harm, disinformation is defined as false information that is manufactured with the intent to harm. This brief will examine the issue of disinformation on social media and its effects on today's society.



Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria in Washington, D.C., the target of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory.

Case Study: #Pizzagate

On June 22, 2017, a North Carolina man was sentenced to 4 years in prison after previously pleading guilty to federal charges of assault with a dangerous weapon and transporting a firearm over state lines. Edgar Maddison Welch, a 28-year-old father of two had read online that Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in northwest Washington, was harboring young children as sex slaves as part of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton (Kang & Goldman, 2016). As part of his "investigation", Mr. Welch fired an AR-15 rifle inside the pizza restaurant after driving for over 6 hours from his home, only to find nothing in the restaurant. In the days and months leading up to this attack, the pizza parlour had seen its social media accounts, and the social media accounts of its staff members, flooded with accusations and threats after various news articles were shared by dubious accounts on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Reddit (Kang & Goldman, 2016). These news articles asserted that Comet Ping Pong was the home base of a pedophilia ring led by Hillary Clinton and her campaign chief, John D. Podesta, a former White House chief of staff. The proof cited by these articles included bizarre references to hot dogs and pizzas that were present in the leaked emails of Mr. Podesta, who was supposedly planning a campaign fundraiser at Comet Ping Pong.

Implications

According to a study conducted by Jonathan Albright, an assistant professor of media analytics at Elon University in North Carolina, an oddly disproportionate share of the tweets about Pizzagate originated from the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Vietnam (Covington, 2016). Additionally, in some cases, the most avid re-tweeters appeared to be bots, programs designed to amplify certain news and information. A prominent example of this phenomenon was highlighted when, within hours of the publication of an article that debunked the conspiracy theory, a twitter account going by "Representative Steven Smith of the 15th District of Georgia" warned that the article was false. As it turns out, there is no Representative Steven Smith or a 15th district in Georgia. The man behind the account was reported as saying that he believes that most

Social Media

How big of a role does social media play in disinformation?

Do the incentives of social media encourage polarized or extreme views?

Do the benefits of social media outweigh the negatives found in disinformation?

Conspiracy Theory

Where did the term conspiracy theory originate from?

Who gets to define what a conspiracy is and is not?

Disinformation

Is it possible to undo the effects of disinformation?

Who should vet alternative news and media sources?

Have mainstream news sources lost credibility? If so, how can it be regained?

Further Reading

University of Washington
How People Investigate –
 Or Don't- Fake News on
 Twitter and Facebook

MIT Technology Review
Health Misinformation
 Pages Got Half a Billion
 Views on Facebook in April

Washington Post
You Are Probably
 Spreading Misinformation.
 Here's How to Stop.

**Centers for Disease Control
 and Prevention**
The Tuskegee Timeline

The New York Times
Project MK Ultra, the CIA's
 Program of Research in
 Behavioural Modification

Futurism
What is « Healthy
 Skepticism » in Science?

Washington Post
Healthy Skepticism

The New York Times
Facebook Removes 790
 QAnon Groups to Fight
 Conspiracy Theory

of his 24,000 followers know that his account is a parody (Kang & Goldman, 2016). Amidst all of this, the social media companies that were used to propagate this, and many other theories, have often struggled with deciding what to do about the accounts or individual posts containing such information. Until the recent pressure, social media platforms often left it up to individual users to vet the information they come across. A question that arises from this is if these companies have an obligation to verify the information that is shared on their platform or does this allow them to regulate stories that negatively portray their company/the government, as can be seen in is how China blocks content related to Tiananmen Square, and the UK taking down the Iranian Press TV's YouTube page.

Comparing Perspectives

In this series, one rationalist ethics theory and one alternative ethics theory are explored to present contrasting views on issues and questions raised.

Discourse Ethics

Discourse Ethics is a rational theory that is mainly concerned with the process through which an ethical conclusion is drawn. In other words, the theory of discourse ethics asserts that in order for a conclusion to a problem be viewed as ethical, it is imperative that such a conclusion is derived from consensual agreements from all involved. With regards to this scenario, a discourse ethicist might argue that the best way to find a solution to this problem will not be found by government or social media companies, but will require an inclusive, participatory discussion about the issues involved and arriving at a conclusion that is arrived at collectively.

Virtue Ethics

As an alternative theory, the theory of virtue ethics asserts that individuals and society at large should always strive to achieve a balance of excess and lack in whatever they undertake. This balance of excess and lack creates virtue and a virtue ethicist might argue that one way individuals can achieve this is by cultivating a healthy skepticism towards suspicious government activity while being willing to change one's mind once information is revealed that provides reasonable explanations. In light of previous government activities like the Tuskegee Experiments or MK Ultra, a virtue ethicist might argue that healthy skepticism is warranted so long as it corroborated by reasonable facts. This balance of skepticism and acceptance of reasonable facts creates the balance that a virtue ethicist might promote. As such, a virtue ethicist might argue that this method of creating balance is ethically justifiable.

Questions for Reflections`

Is the onus on social media companies to stop the spread of disinformation? Is this an area for the government to get involved in? Or is it on the individual to vet information through reliable, accurate sources? What advantages and disadvantages exist to putting the onus on each group of people? Even if the intention behind putting the onus on government/social media companies is pure, is there the possibility of this power being abused? What examples of abuse of power can be pointed towards to discourage allowing these institutions to control what information people receive? Finally, how can people learn to tell whether information is misinformation or disinformation?

Covington, O. (2016, December 05). Elon professor's research on 'fake news' ecosystem generating international attention. <https://www.elon.edu/u/news/2016/12/05/elon-professors-research-on-fake-news-ecosystem-generating-international-attention/>

Kang, C., & Goldman, A. (2016, December 05). In Washington Pizzeria Attack, Fake News Brought Real Guns. Retrieved August 21, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/business/media/comet-ping-pong-pizza-shooting-fake-news-consequences.html>





