

Navigating the Covid-19 Infodemic

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“Fake News” has become a hot topic since the 2016 presidential election. The surprising results of that election made us aware that globally-orchestrated campaigns to spread false information through social media are conducted to sow and deepen divisions, manipulate public opinion, and erode our trust in democratic institutions such as the free press. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this problem has only gotten worse and more dangerous. We find ourselves in an “infodemic” that comes from a lack of perspective, a lack of literacy skills, a lack of critical thinking, and disregard for scientific inquiry. Solving the pandemic has become not just a matter of science or debate about facts. The spread of misinformation has helped politicize data and science-based information, and deepen partisan divisions. UNESCO, the United Nations’ educational arm, has been sounding the alarm on this, warning that so much amplification of disinformation may result in the marginalization of factual information.¹

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. It has long been weaponized as a political and social tool to obfuscate, coerce, and control. Plato’s *Protagoras* dialogue states that “the masses...perceive nothing, but merely sing the tune their leaders announce” (317 a-b), and Aristotle warned in *Politics* about the “intemperance of demagogues” (Part V) sowing the seeds of political and societal unrest through division.² Despite the intervening millennia, misinformation in its varied guises--from disinformation and propaganda to conspiracy theories--are still being used by today’s demagogues to manipulate the electorate. Our deeply partisan political climate, combined with the ubiquity of social media and the 24/7 news cycle, have enabled misinformation to spread rapidly, profoundly impacting all our lives as global citizens.

Coordinated Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns aim to manipulate public opinion by playing on “emotions, fears, prejudices and ignorance” to create a false sense of “meaning and certainty” in a complex and constantly changing reality.³ The fact that we as a global society have not experienced something like this pandemic in recent history breeds uncertainty, confusion, and a desire to find answers. It is this desire for answers that often gets manipulated through the deliberate dissemination of misinformation.

As with the 2016 election, there is evidence that much of the false information that is spreading during the pandemic is part of coordinated campaigns to spread or amplify disinformation. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon reported recently that nearly half of the Twitter accounts posting false information about Covid-19 are bots.⁴ In April, the *New York Times* reported that China and Russia are engaged in

¹ “During This Coronavirus Pandemic, ‘Fake News’ Is Putting Lives at Risk: UNESCO,” UN News, April 13, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061592>.

² Étienne Brown, “Propaganda, Misinformation, and the Epistemic Value of Democracy,” *Critical Review* 30, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2018): 194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2018.1575007>.

³ “During This Coronavirus Pandemic, ‘Fake News’ Is Putting Lives at Risk.”

⁴ “Researchers: Nearly Half Of Accounts Tweeting About Coronavirus Are Likely Bots,” NPR.org, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/20/859814085/researchers-nearly-half-of-accounts-tweeting-about-coronavirus-are-likely-bots>.

spreading misinformation through websites and social media promoting conspiracy theories and discredited information aimed at both Western and non-Western audiences.⁵

This misinformation takes many forms--from unproven "cures" to conspiracy theories surrounding the origins of the virus--which proliferate across the Internet at a rapid-fire pace, sometimes even being broadcast by the President of the United States, making it difficult for people to follow the facts about the unfolding crisis. UNESCO says that the spread of false news about the virus is costing lives.⁶ For example, the recent "Plandemic" documentary makes several dangerous and false claims about the virus--including a claim that wearing face coverings can "activate" the virus, and warning that any coming vaccine would be deadly.⁷ The documentary quickly went viral, amplified by celebrity doctors and others, inciting "Reopen America" protest groups around the country, and potentially harming efforts to stop the spread of the virus around the globe.⁸ While the spread of misinformation around global health issues is not a new phenomena (for example, the misinformation that circulated during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s), what we are currently witnessing is on an entirely different scale--and much of it is fueled by social media use.

The Power of Social Media

Social media--and our behavior on it--gives misinformation new power. According to the PEW Research Center, around 4 in 10 U.S. adults get their news from Facebook and about 1 in 5 get news from Twitter. PEW also reports that most Facebook users do not understand how the Facebook feed works--or why they see certain posts and not others.⁹ Why is this significant? Behind social media "feeds" are algorithms that show you what the platform thinks you want to see based on your online behavior--the content you seek out and interact with, the pages you follow, and the things you shop for. This creates a **filter bubble** of information--a situation where a user only encounters news and information that aligns with their interests, beliefs, and values (as interpreted by the algorithm). Most people do not even notice bias in their feeds because of **confirmation bias**--the tendency to seek out and believe information that confirms one's views, values, or beliefs. Essentially, we experience online media as "echo chambers," virtual spaces that reinforce our views and biases.¹⁰ These echo chambers make us more likely to fall victim to misinformation and distrust information that does not conform to our beliefs. We are more likely to share "information" (which may come in the form of news stories, tweets, memes, screenshots, videos or images) that advance our opinions, and discount contradictory information as unreliable or downright false.

⁵ Julian E. Barnes, Matthew Rosenberg, and Edward Wong, "As Virus Spreads, China and Russia See Openings for Disinformation," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/us/politics/china-russia-coronavirus-disinformation.html>.

⁶ UNESCO, "UNESCO Calls for Countering Misinformation about COVID-19," UNESCO, April 6, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-calls-counteracting-misinformation-about-covid-19>.

⁷ Stephanie Pappas-Live, "Debunking the Most Dangerous Claims of 'Plandemic,'" *livescience.com*, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.livescience.com/debunking-plandemic-coronavirus-claims.html>.

⁸ Sheera Frenkel, Ben Decker, and Davey Alba, "How the 'Plandemic' Movie and Its Falsehoods Spread Widely Online," *The New York Times*, sec. Technology, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/technology/plandemic-movie-youtube-facebook-coronavirus.html>.

⁹ "10 Facts about Americans and Facebook," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/16/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/>.

¹⁰ Petter Törnberg, "Echo Chambers and Viral Misinformation: Modeling Fake News as Complex Contagion," *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 9 (September 20, 2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203958>.

Information Literacy

Information literacy can play a significant role in combating the power and sway of misinformation, especially during tumultuous times. The American Library Association defines information literacy as the ability to “recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.”¹¹ In our current media environment, these skills are more critical than ever before and are a necessary element of civic responsibility.

Unfortunately, recent studies evaluating young people’s ability to evaluate information have yielded alarming results. A 2019 study by the Stanford History Education Group found that the overwhelming majority of high school students in the United States are unprepared to identify trustworthy information online. Most students could not distinguish advertisements from news stories, did not track down sources for videos and memes, and failed to look critically at information on websites.¹² In the complex information world we now live in, clearly young people are not learning to think critically about information. As citizens, we rely on online information to make decisions about who to vote for, what policies to support, and how to keep ourselves safe and healthy. The consequences of not prioritizing information literacy education are clearly seen in our current divisive political climate and the globally disparate responses to the pandemic itself.

What Can We Do?

The sheer volume of false information, the forces behind it, and the ease of its spread have become serious threats to democratic society, undermining elections and sabotaging our ability to respond to a global public health crisis. It is crucial that we push back against these forces and commit to the truth as information consumers and as citizens. The following suggestions are ways we can make an impact both in our individual interactions with media and on a broader level:

Check your emotional response. False information is designed to provoke strong emotions and tap into our fears, anxieties, and biases. If you find yourself reacting emotionally to information you come across, stop. Step back, take a deep breath, and do a little more research before you respond. Being responsible about information involves balancing science and expert advice with your own complicated feelings about what we are all going through. It is both global and personal at the same time.

Think critically and check facts. In *Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers*¹³, the author lays out 4 strategies for making sure information you come across is reliable: 1) “Check for previous work” to see if the claims have already been fact-checked or proven inaccurate; 2) “Go upstream to the source” to look for the origins of the information and see if it is from a reputable source; 3) “Read laterally” to find out what others say about the publisher or the author - think of information as a network of nodes; and 4) “Circle back” if you get lost down the “rabbit hole” of information and need to find your way back.

¹¹ “Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report,” Text, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), July 24, 2006, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>.

¹² Joel Breakstone et al., “Students’ Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait” (Stanford History Education Group, November 2019), <https://purl.stanford.edu/gf151tb4868>.

¹³ Mike Caulfield, “Web Literacy for Student Fact Checkers,” in *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers* (Self-published, 2017), <https://webliteracy.pressbooks.com/front-matter/web-strategies-for-student-fact-checkers/>.

Making these practices a habit can make us less vulnerable to false information. (For a list of excellent fact checking tools & tips, see our [Fake News](#) resource guide.)

Break out of your filter bubble. In order to understand all perspectives on events, consider the potential bias of the sources you turn to and look for perspectives outside that bubble. Websites such as [Allsides.com](#) can be useful tools to understand media bias and see the differences in reporting.

Advocate for information literacy education. Information literacy must be viewed as an essential part of civics education, and we cannot assume that digitally native generations have these skills. All educators have a responsibility to encourage students to think critically about information and learn to evaluate its quality. Librarians, as information professionals, are well positioned to support information literacy education at all levels. Here at Bard, we offer workshops on fake news and information evaluation, work with students individually to help them navigate the complicated world of information, and collaborate with faculty to incorporate information literacy into their courses.

Support and amplify quality journalism. The free press is a key democratic institution, and the “fake news” phenomenon has weakened the impact of professional reporting. Select news sources that adhere to professional journalism standards and ethics such as those of the [Society of Professional Journalists](#).

Conclusion

The “infodemic” of false information makes a challenging time even more challenging. Critical thinking skills can enable us to have a deeper and more profound understanding of our current situation. If we push hard to instill information literacy as an integral part of our civic responsibilities, we will come out of this moment as stronger and more capable citizens digging deeper for the truth in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

For further reading about the problem of false information, and resources to fight it, see our [Fake News](#) resource guide: libguides.bard.edu/fakenews.

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