

Exploring the Misinformation Landscape

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SPEAKERS

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ABOUT THE EVENT HOST



NETWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC POLICY is a non-partisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides credible news and authoritative information on key public policy issues to foster informed citizenry and civic engagement. NFRPP is a trusted source that follows media literacy guidelines. It strives to motivate conversations, mitigate polarization, and combat misinformation. NFRPP's vision is to contribute to and foster a vibrant democracy through education and civic engagement. For more information, visit: www.nfrpp.org.

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Fighting Fake

JOHN SILVA

- We need to retire the term “fake news”. Since 2016 it has become a weaponized and dismissive term. It is also often used ironically.
- The most common types of misinformation include:
 - Manipulated content: photoshopped element(s) of a real image.
 - False context: changing the caption or meaning of a photo.
 - Fabricated content: completely made up.
 - Imposter content: false content created to look authentic from someone famous.
- Motivations behind misinformation include making money, creating mischief, gaining partisan political advantage, or undermining trust in democracy.
- The four main types of propagators are:
 - Self-interest: scams and clickbait farming.
 - Group interest: partisans, governments, and candidates.
 - Altruistic: ordinary people (sharing information thought to be real and useful).
 - Malicious: trolls, extremists, and conspiracy theorists.
- Eliciting an emotional response is a key factor to how misinformation manipulates. Our emotion centers override rational thought processes. We instantly react by sharing, retweeting, or commenting.
- Teens and older adults are especially vulnerable to misinformation because of brain development and decline, respectively. Additionally, older adults who are emotionally attached to their beliefs will react strongly to misinformation that reinforces those beliefs. Any emotion can be used against us.

Role of Journalism

KYLE POPE

- How should journalists report on false information coming from President Trump’s official Twitter account? Although not everything the President says is newsworthy, journalists have a responsibility to point out falsehoods.
- Columbia Journalism Review (CJR) published a piece by researchers from Harvard who analyzed 55,000 news stories, 5,000,000 tweets, and 75,000 Facebook posts that referred to mail-in voting fraud. The researchers found that most Americans were alerted to concerns about mail-in voting fraud by mainstream news outlets rebutting the false claims. The original false posts or stories were otherwise seen by a relatively small number of people.
- This points to the need for a new way of thinking about journalism. Journalists should be non-partisan about calling out falsehoods. The media seems to believe that calling out a lie or untruth is a partisan and political act, and there is discomfort in that.
- In the context of political misinformation, at what point should the moderator at a presidential debate jump in and say something is not true? Or, is it up to the viewers to judge for themselves?
- Coronavirus misinformation has been prevalent this year, which can affect people’s lives and their health.
- The conventional rules of journalism have not kept pace with today’s misinformation world.
- What are the big projects journalism as a profession needs to tackle? Journalists and media sources need to stay true to the principles of fair and balanced reporting.

Question and Answer Takeaways

- **For news consumers who want to do better, what are some tools or techniques?**
 - Silva: The first step is to recognize the difference between news and opinion. Determine if the content is trying to inform or persuade you. Also, do lateral reading—Google it! Open a new window and search details to verify the information for yourself. If consulting a fact-checking site, the most reputable ones show their evidence. For images, do a reverse image search.
 - Pope: Opinion has swallowed up many news organizations, including newspapers and cable networks. Local newspapers have done a better job of segregating opinion from fact and clearly labeling opinion pieces. Local television reporting is largely devoid of opinion.
- **Are fact-checking/debunking sites doing more harm than good? What should responsible journalists be doing?**
 - Pope: Trump is not lying less because he is being called out on it, and the spread of misinformation is not going down. We need to be more thoughtful about how we package these stories—contextualize the false hood in the story as it is being reported, as opposed to reporting the falsehood and then fact checking later.
 - Silva: The relationship and importance in everyday life between a person’s political beliefs and their identity has increased. People on the extreme ends will not be swayed. However, fact checks can reduce the virality of misinformation in many cases. Fact-checking sites need to eliminate loaded language, and just label claims as true or false.
- **What is the role of news consumers to ensure they are not part of the problem by spreading misinformation?**
 - Silva: We can use social media responsibly for its intended purpose, which is to maintain social connections. If we want to be informed, we cannot get our news from Facebook or Twitter. We must go to a reputable source.
 - Pope: People need to take responsibility for what they are reading and where it is coming from. Just because the information is on your feed, does not mean it is true.
- **How do we combat misinformation from foreign sources?**
 - Silva: It may not be possible to stop misinformation from foreign sources, but the reason it goes viral is because people share it.
- **How do we civically engage with others who may have bought into misinformation that suits their confirmation bias?**
 - Silva: Do not approach with confrontation. Rather, use empathy. You want them to look at new information and analyze it for themselves. Be prepared to walk away.
- **Should social media have stronger rules for political speech?**
 - Silva: Platforms need to step up and take responsibility for misinformation. The users should hold these platforms accountable, not Congress or legislation.
 - Pope: News outlets need to take responsibility for outsourcing their audiences to social media platforms.
- **Can you suggest the names of fact-checking organizations?**
 - Politifact, AFP, NewsGuard. However, it is impossible for them to keep up.
- **Will there be another Walter Cronkite or “Firing Line” to help inform the public?**
 - Pope: There are some long-form interviews in print. There is appetite for it, but the economics of journalism are working against them.
- **Is there historical research on our news outlets that show periods of misinformation thriving? What might create that environment?**
 - Silva: Misinformation is not new. 2020 has created the perfect storm because there are so many things causing anxiety and discomfort. People can be more easily manipulated.
- **Do we need to train teens to become their own fact checkers?**
 - Silva: Absolutely. We should start even younger. Research suggests starting general news literacy in third grade.