MISINFORMATION

HARMFUL HEADLINES

CELEBS SPREADING LIES

TRAPPED IN THE ECHO CHAMBER

JUST THE FACTS

BY RC WALLFISCH
The 21st century has ushered in the full force of globalization, often characterized by speed and connectivity. The internet and other new technologies have brought the world to people’s fingertips, and it’s no mystery why today has been dubbed the information age.

The fast and free flow of information has many obvious benefits. Yet, the ease and anonymity with which anyone can now publish and spread information make it difficult to differentiate the true from the false. Misinformation, falsities, and fake news permeate our increasingly online society. Spreading information globally means that it moves faster than ever before.

When it comes to misinformation, people often think of false stories spread through social media, or clickbait. Clickbait distorts the truth to encourage people to click on headlines, generating more money for websites. It can involve pictures being swapped out in an otherwise true story to create a new narrative. Or, wild claims may be made in an article with made-up citations to make it look well researched.

Not every instance of inaccurate information is fake news. Journalistic errors and news that people don’t agree with can quickly be labeled misinformation, and pieces from satire sites (such as The Onion) can be outlandish enough for unfamiliar audiences to click “share.” But satirical platforms are open about their comedic nature, and reputable publications are receptive towards making edits and

A poster displays untrue claims about vaccines at a protest event at the Pennsylvania state capitol in 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation led many people to avoid life-saving vaccines.
being corrected. Misinformation requires a layer of intentional deception. It often comes from a hoax news site, a politically motivated social media strategy, or—rarely—a case of a false story going viral and being picked up by established news outlets.

Information can be published and accessed from anywhere, making it easy for people to find and share things that aren’t true. However, people promoting viral misinformation are often introduced to that content because of wider misinformation campaigns. They use advertising campaigns, coordinated online interactions, and social media bots. Though misinformation at a person-to-person level is an issue on its own, it has dangers distinct from misinformation campaigns.

In the past few years, governments and independent institutions from the World Health Organization (WHO) to The New York Times have set up databases that track and compile well-circulated misinformation campaigns, with guides for individuals on recognizing, reporting, and resisting fake news. Yet, in the information age, news is decentralized—it can come from anywhere, including social media—meaning that we can track and follow misinformation, but regulating it is complicated.

Inaccurate information can be harmful, but critics say regulating it legally would limit free speech. Others argue that social media platforms are private companies and can do more to stop the spread of dangerous content, since they’re not necessarily beholden to protecting free speech.

MISINFORMATION EVERYWHERE

It doesn’t take a long time to find questionable information online. Spend a few moments on Facebook or any other social network and you might find people who believe COVID-19 was created by the U.S. military. Or others who argue that Earth is completely flat. People offer false evidence that vaccines are harmful, or that cellular networks can cause a variety of medical conditions. Sometimes these people are even well-known celebrities.

Entertainment figures including Jim Carrey, Madonna, Nicki Minaj, and Jessica Biel have made headlines for spreading misinformation.

Misinformation is a problem that comes from both ends of the American political spectrum. However, studies have shown that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to share misinformation.

Confirmation bias describes people’s desire to seek out and agree with information that confirms what they already believe. Many people have lost trust in major institutions, leading them to be open to new or obscure information sources. This turn away from bigger news outlets comes after decades of closures and cutbacks at local newspapers and magazines. Instead, many people are turning to newer media outlets that present polarized political opinions and misinformation as real news. Many of these media outlets rely on social media for their stories to spread. In studies, as many as 50 percent of people in the United States have reported seeing fake news stories on social media. Social media allows people to rapidly share and promote stories that align with their beliefs—they also make it easier for those beliefs to be exploited and radicalized.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD FREE SPEECH EVER BE CENSORED FOR THE COMMON GOOD?

YES

✓ Censorship can prevent the spread of harmful misinformation.
✓ Censoring what people post online is not limiting free speech.
✓ Verifying and fact-checking information is an important form of social and civic participation.

NO

✗ Censorship only leads people to alternative platforms.
✗ People should be free to speak their minds, no matter what.
✗ Verifying and fact-checking are often unreliable, biased practices.

CENSORED
always exaggerated some truths or understated others in order to sway people in their favor.

The new ways that information can travel have created new facets to the propaganda problem. "Hard news" sources—established national outlets—drift deeper into entertainment, a byproduct of needing to be profitable. At the same time, social media platforms that used to be pure entertainment become more political. The speed of online information-sharing has made it easier for echo chambers to strengthen. This creates a vicious cycle that accelerates polarized attitudes and beliefs.

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Facebook is currently being sued for 150 billion pounds by Rohingya refugees of Myanmar. The Rohingya are a primarily Muslim ethnic group that has been subject to genocide, and Facebook has admitted blame for its unregulated platform fanning the flames of the violence. Meanwhile, on Twitter, bots that promoted fake COVID-19 cures may have led huge numbers of people across the nation to avoid proper medical care. Real lives are at stake when misinformation takes over. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of WHO, has called the situation an “infodemic.”

Studies have shown that false stories spread “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information” on social media platforms. The virality of misinformation has propelled people such as Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene into celebrity, and it’s unclear if Twitter’s ban on her account (for violating misinformation policies) will do anything to slow down her following.

**A CHANGING WORLD**

According to the American Historical Association, the term “propaganda” has been used commonly in the United States since World War I. Propaganda, however, has been around since long before that. Whenever one part of society controls information channels—whether it be private companies, a government, or something else—there is power to influence what goes through those channels. In partisan politics, opposing groups have always exaggerated some truths or understated others in order to sway people in their favor.

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more information that evokes negative emotional responses like anger, hate, and fear. What starts as mildly inflammatory content can quickly become a feed consumed by false information rooted in violence, sexism, and racism.

Algorithmic feeds have been described as turning internet experiences from active to passive—that is, information is brought to us now, instead of us seeking it out. The way social media algorithms affect human thought and behavior is still unclear, though we know they are good at creating echo chambers and stirring up controversy.

LOOKING FORWARD
Countries all over the world have taken steps to limit the spread of misinformation, with varying degrees of success. Governments that enact anti-misinformation legislation are often accused of going too far and using those laws to shut down dissenting news.

Policy addressing misinformation is largely absent because it is seen as the responsibility of social media companies to regulate the content that appears on their sites. Governments and the public often can only ask social media companies to do better. Major tech players like Google, Facebook, and Twitter have internal teams monitoring flagged content, studying how misinformation is shared, and designing systems to prevent it, but their systems are black box—most of the data, design, and decision-making, and design are kept behind closed doors.

No matter how good a platform’s internal review systems are, the final decision to remove content or posts is left up to human moderators. There is a wide gap between the number of posts made around the world and the humans available to parse through them. At any given time, there are over 20 million flagged posts on Facebook, marked by automated systems but waiting for review.

Independent fact-checkers are vital in filling some of the holes

Comedian Joe Rogan (left) came under fire in early 2022 for his history of spreading harmful misinformation on his wildly popular podcast. Musicians such as Neil Young (right) pulled their music from Spotify, the service that hosts Rogan’s show, because they didn’t want to be associated with this misinformation.

SHOULD PUBLIC FIGURES BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR SPREADING MISINFORMATION?

YES
✓ Public figures and celebrities should be held to a higher standard than other people.
✓ Public figures shouldn’t use their fame to influence people’s opinions in fields outside of their own.
✓ Public figures can single-handedly popularize damaging misinformation.

NO
✗ Public figures and celebrities are individual people and are not responsible for the size of their following.
✗ Public figures can use their voices and platforms to speak on whatever they choose.
✗ Individuals are responsible for coming to their own conclusions about the information they see.
SHOULD PRIVATE COMPANIES BE ABLE TO BAN PUBLIC FIGURES?

YES
✓ Social media platforms should do everything they can to limit the spread of misinformation.
✓ Banning public figures who spread misinformation is an effective way of limiting their reach.
✓ Social media platforms like Twitter are private companies that have their own rules for what users can and can’t do.

NO
✗ Social media platforms are not responsible for regulating what people say on them.
✗ Banning public figures simply directs them and their following to other platforms.
✗ Social media platforms have flawed systems for removing and banning content.

THE DEBATE

In an effort to garner support for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government spread false rumors that the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky (above) was a supporter of Nazis, even though Zelensky is Jewish.

that government and corporate policy can’t. These individuals and organizations do the dirty work of verifying information that circulates online. The Pew Center, the Hewlett Foundation, and The New York Times Viral Misinformation Tracker are all examples of fact-checking groups.

In your everyday interactions, both online and in person, there are things you can do when you come across misinformation. A crucial step is to think critically and ask questions when you’re presented with something that looks like a news story on social media. Ask yourself: Who wrote or published this? Is there anything about the author or the publication that could indicate bias? Are there quotations from recognizable figures? Is the article dated? If you see a story that gives you a particularly strong emotional response—especially on social media—slow down and evaluate what is going on in the information itself, not your emotions.

When talking to others who are basing their positions on false information, it’s important to
find common ground, to see if there are other areas where you may connect before diving into disagreements. Engaging people with compassion and encouraging a scientific attitude—that is, a willingness to change one’s mind—is one way to slow down the rapid acceptance and dissemination of false news. Vibrant discourse, debates, and discussions, a real kind of back and forth at a face-to-face level, are needed in a polarized society. Now, more than ever, is a time to focus on communication.

WHAT YOU CAN DO
Fighting the spread of misinformation is no simple matter, but each and every person can help by staying aware of the issue and working to keep others informed.

- **Read** reliable news sources that have strong reputations for reporting based on facts.
- **Question** the things you see on social media, and don’t be afraid to calmly set the record straight if friends and relatives are sharing misinformation.
- **Avoid** sharing misinformation in your own social media posts. Think twice before reposting or reacting to the latest viral story.
- **Write** or **call** your elected officials to let them know what you think should be done about misinformation.
- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can’t vote until you’re 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you’ll be all set when 18 rolls around.

**Jahin & Fahmin Rahman**
Jahin and Fahmin Rahman are a brother-sister duo of information activists and part of the MediaWise Teen Fact Checker program. On top of advocating for truth through independent fact-checking, the siblings from Queens, New York, have founded their own organization, Efforts in Youth Development (EYDB), in Bangladesh. EYDB has raised over $20,000 to provide educational opportunities and resources for at-risk Bangladeshi youth, partnering with the New York City Department of Education to build an international organization of around 300 youth volunteers.

**Agron Gojcj**
Agron Gojcj is an information activist from Montenegro. He’s a member of the UNICEF Young Reporters (below), a group focused on preventing the spread of misinformation related to COVID-19. Gojcj writes articles and blog posts that fact-check stories on topics from vaccination to nutrition, and he has taken popular questions and misperceptions about COVID-19 to doctors at the Clinical Center of Montenegro for video interviews published on the UNICEF website.

**Nereida Galvez Peñaloza**
In her home town of Fresno, California, Nereida Galvez Peñaloza is a “promoterito,” a Spanish term for a young community health worker. At 17, Nereida joined six other promoteritos to dispel misinformation about COVID-19 in the Latinx community and encourage vaccination for their neighbors and relatives. The promoteritos in Fresno show the importance of community advocates reflecting and relating to the people they work with.
WADING THROUGH THE MUCK OF MISINFORMATION

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? What effects has misinformation had on recent elections?
2. Which pipes in the cartoon are most important to turn off? Why?
3. What could social networks do to prevent misinformation from impacting voters’ decisions?

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. What legislation would you propose to address the issue of misinformation?
2. What positive effects does social media have on the way we share information?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Have you ever believed something you read online, only to find out later that it wasn’t true? How did you feel when you learned the truth?

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KEY WORDS & TERMS

- algorithms
- black box
- confirmation bias
- decentralized
- echo chambers
- fake news
- globalization
- hoax
- propaganda
- radicalized

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