

How Can Social Media Play a Role in Combating Fake News

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Abstract: The shift from a mass media culture to a social media culture has allowed people to access information in more diverse ways. The emergence of social media has provided people with a fast and efficient platform to exchange information and has gradually become the main channel for people to share information and get news. However, the double-edged sword effect of social media has gradually become apparent, with a large number of fake news stories mixed in. This paper will examine six different types of fake news through a literature review approach: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda, and the motives of the purveyors. It also uses the COVID-19 pandemic as a background and selects social media such as Facebook and Twitter to discuss the role they play in combating fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Facebook has taken the approach of partnering with professional agencies to provide accurate information about the epidemic on its social media platforms; Twitter has also reduced the amount of misinformation spread by adjusting its internal algorithmic pushing mechanism and hashtags.

Keywords: social media, fake news, misinformation, dissemination, free speech.

1. Introduction

With the development of media in recent decades, the transformation from a mass media culture to a social media culture has led to a greater diversity of access to information. The advent of social media has given people a variety of platforms to communicate and disseminate information, and this rapid flow of information has created a vast information ecosystem that has led to a proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. In such an information ecosystem, we could be in an information war at any time, and we need to worry not only about fake news, misinformation, and disinformation that people are unknowingly sharing, but also about the large-scale fake news, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns that are organized. In the age of mass media, the “one-to-many” broadcast format was the most common technique used to try to influence public opinion. However, in the social media era, the development of social networks and the algorithmic use of big data has allowed transmitters to push specific promotional content directly to users who are more likely to accept and share it. Once these users have inadvertently shared these misleading images, videos, posts, emojis, and more on their social media accounts, they can be re-disseminated by other users who have visited their account pages and trust these original publishers [1]. Social media is like a “hotbed” for these fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, using the “peer-to-peer” form of communication. In this context, the paper will use the research methodology of a literature review to analyse the different types of misinformation and disinformation. Furthermore, we also need to

discuss how social media, as a communication medium, can play a role in combating fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.

2. What is “Fake News”?

2.1. Definition of “Fake News”

The term “fake news” is often used in earlier media to describe news articles that contain untruths and malicious guidance that may mislead readers. However, “fake news” cannot refer to all false information; for example, misinformation is sharing false information without harmful intent, and disinformation is sharing false information to cause harm [1]. But it is obvious that this term does not accurately describe and distinguish between these different types of false information, which are generated for different purposes and motives. Regarding the main motivations for creating fake news, Allcott and Gentzkow in 2017 suggested two aspects they are economic and ideological [2]. In terms of economic benefits, as some overly outrageous and exaggerated false news headlines are instead more likely to attract the attention of readers and generate widespread discussion, high click-through rates provide the purveyors with advertising value that can be converted into revenue. In terms of ideological benefits, disseminators will produce fake news to promote their views to drive public opinion or to smear competitors. Although fake news has long been a buzzword in the media sector, its current citation seems to have changed a lot from its previous definition. The term “fake news” has been used in current studies to define many related but different types of content, such as political influence, partisanship, news propaganda, news parody and so on. So fake news is not just referred to news anymore, it is about the whole information ecosystem. In order to understand and identify the types of fake news at a more in-depth level, we need to examine the ways in which fake news is manipulated in recognition of how it is defined in different contexts. According to Edson et al [3], the methods of manipulating fake news can be summarized in the following six key words: satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda.

2.2. Six Different Types of “Fake News”

News satire usually refers to the use of humor and exaggeration in the performance of the latest news, which is then presented to the audience in the form of a comedy show. These programs are similar to regular news programs and are usually in the style of television news broadcasts. However, the obvious difference between the two is that the news satire programs are primarily entertaining and do not focus on the reported information itself. These news satires are considered an increasingly important part of the information ecosystem, and satirical programs have a significant impact on the discussion of social issues in public discourse [4]. People often draw on humorous discourse to express their grievances of polity, economy, and society, which makes criticism seem implicit and accessible. Although in previous studies news satire has been identified as fake news because of its exaggerated facts, in fact their falsity exists only in the form of presentation; the core satirical content is based on reality.

News parody also engages the audience through humor, but it differs from news satire in that the stories it tells are fabricated and completely fictional, and it also serves as an outlet for current social discontent, acting as a watchdog of the media alongside news satire and contributing to the professionalism of traditional journalism.

News fabrication is a typical form of fake news, which refers to the publication of unsubstantiated and untrue news in the form of traditional news articles. It is often produced with the intention of misleading readers, and because the fabricated news is so similar to legitimate news articles and is often published by non-news organisations, it is more difficult for readers to distinguish its authenticity and reliability. Social media is the most widespread platform for spreading news

fabrication, and the reason why fake news is often mistaken for real news is not just because of the form of articles, but because it relies on the “ecosystem of real-time propaganda” of social media. In this online ecosystem, bots build a network of fake news and use algorithms to select readers who are more prone to response fake news to push the same set of fake news [5]. This pushing pattern gives readers the delusion that there are many people reading the fake news at the same time, and when they try to verify the news, they may search for another website that publishes the same fake news, which makes them believe the content of the fake news even further. The fourth type of fake news: manipulation, which mainly refers to the manipulation of videos or pictures. This type of fake news is usually produced by altering the original media content through editing and splicing videos or compositing and modifying photos in order to spread false events.

Advertising, as a specific type of fake news, differs from other types of fake news in that it is more focused on financial profit. Advertising agencies produce videos or other forms of propaganda schemes that are recognized as fake news and then provide them to the television news media. These fake news advertising videos are then reported alongside other real news to convince audiences to believe the fake news and buy the advertised product. Advertising relies on the value of real news to attract the audience's attention, but instead of guiding their consumption, it does not provide the audience with the corresponding news information [6]. In this process, the audience is easy to be misled and even sow hidden dangers of public opinion.

Propaganda, the last type of fake news, is used by political parties to influence public perception and control the political trend. Political parties commonly fabricate news to be posted on social media and promote the party by manipulating algorithmic push mechanisms or moderating comment sections. It is worth mentioning that advertising and propaganda share the same motivation, both of them gaining the trust of the audience by combining real news to enhance the credibility of the fabricated fake news.

3. Role of Social Media

The transformation from mass media culture to social media culture makes social media become the most important information exchange platform for people in today's society. Daily access to information has gradually shifted from newspapers and broadcasting to online, and social media has become the primary way for most people to access news and events. This shift in communication has increased the influence of the media, while at the same time misinformation has found new outlets to disseminate. The proliferation of misinformation is also subconsciously influencing the judgement we make when viewing information on social media. We need to discuss how social media can effectively combat misinformation in this context.

3.1. Characteristics of Social Media

The development of online media has enabled the rise of citizen journalism, which means that ordinary users who are not journalists can post news articles on their social accounts and engage in journalistic activities. Initially, the content of citizen journalism was published only in the form of blogs, but with the advent of social media, users can post photos, videos, and events they find newsworthy [7]. Professional journalists and news organizations also gradually turned their attention to social media, and their accounts were often specifically labelled as verified accounts. Although at first these verified accounts only used social media as an additional platform for promotion, they now also interact with their audience in the comments section [8]. Social media makes it possible for every user to participate in news activities, as there is no barrier to use, and everyone can publish articles in their own accounts. This model has changed the traditional way of disseminating news and has given social media the ability to spread breaking news quickly and widely. The architecture of social media

encourages clicking, liking, sharing, and engaging with content. This interaction makes it easy to exchange information almost at the touch of a finger. When a tweet has many users liking, commenting, or sharing it, the algorithm will mark the tweet as “popular” and will automatically push it to more users who may be interested in the tweet. It is therefore likely to receive more attention and more likes, comments and so on. And the “post then filter” model of sharing information allows people to share something quickly on social media without checking how genuine it is. Because of the characteristics of social media itself, it is easier for misinformation to mix with real information and be spread.

3.2. Fake News in the Context of COVID-19

The most recent major challenge to misinformation on social media platforms would be the rampant spread of medical misinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic struck the world in 2020. Due to the unprecedented severity of the pandemic, many countries and regions have imposed embargoes and banned people from going outside for non-specific reasons [9]. In this situation, social media became an important way to get information from the outside and people used it to obtain the latest information about the pandemic. Some unscrupulous media organizations take advantage of this gap in the single mode of communication and use the opportunity to spread rumors, false news and other harmful information on social media. With the already difficult distinction between sources of information, people can easily be misled by the mix of misinformation and true information posted on social media. For example, strange remedies have been posted on social media claiming that “drinking chlorine dioxide and industrial bleach can cure COVID-19”, and if people believe these remedies and try them, they are likely to die.

3.3. How Can Social Media Combat Misinformation?

Faced with such a significant challenge to the spread of fake news, the major social media platforms have responded with decisive action. Facebook has committed to using automated methods to remove millions of statements identified as very serious harms in relation to COVID-19 and has provided scientifically correct counter statements in response to statements identified as less serious harms. In addition to this, Facebook has partnered with the World Health Organization and UNICEF to provide coronavirus information centers in outbreak-prone areas [10]. The collaboration between social media and the professional sector will provide users with accurate information about the epidemic, which will be posted on the homepage of social media, and the rumors will also be dispelled [11]. Twitter, another popular social media platform, also responded strategically to the misinformation challenge by adjusting the platform's algorithmic pushing mechanism to increase the frequency of authority dissemination. At the same time, Twitter removed auto-recommendations for information related to COVID-19 posted by unofficial and unverified accounts. Twitter has also provided prominent hashtags and warning messages below tweets that may contain misleading content, which provide additional context to help users verify the source and accuracy of the information [12]. There are also a number of unmentioned social media platforms that have similarly responded to the fake news that has emerged during the ongoing period of COVID-19. These platforms deserve commendation for their approach, however, the spread of fake news is constant, and we must be prepared to fight it in the long term.

4. Discussion

As social media becomes the most popular platform for people to access information on a daily basis, it also makes misinformation more easily spread, and social media platforms must take regulatory measures to prevent its spread. However, when it comes to misinformation, we frequently hear

communicators use the argument of limiting free expression as a rhetorical device to blame the platform [13]. Therefore, it is also worth exploring how social media platforms should balance the relationship between freedom of expression and the regulation of misinformation. Freedom of expression is recognised as a fundamental human right in many countries. To some extent, the protection of freedom of speech reflects the degree of democracy in a country. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to freely express their ideas and opinions, and that everyone can promote and receive opinions on media platforms [14]. But there is no absolute freedom in a society governed by the rule of law today. As stated in Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our right to freedom should be accompanied by restrictions provided by law, and these restrictions exist to ensure that we express an essential respect for the rights of others and comply with basic morality and public order. But it is apparent that allowing false news to be spread on social media not only seriously undermines the credibility of the media, but also disrespects the right to know of those who read it, or worse, may induce readers to behave aggressively and disrupt the social order. Therefore, media platforms need to develop management strategies within the complex boundaries of law and ethics. As censors, social media platforms openly support freedom of speech while requiring users to accept specific terms of service, so that media platforms will have the right to restrict inappropriate speech or fake news [15]. When the published fake news contains harmful remarks, social media platforms will usually balance freedom of speech and content management by allowing the publication of the content but restricting the dissemination and access rights of the content [16]. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have adopted reporting mechanisms to filter and limit the spread of such inappropriate news. If a user, while browsing the software, discovers some fake news containing harmful statements, they can complain about the article to the censors of the platform, who will then verify whether the statements are justified and take appropriate action. However, users who are newly exposed to such false news may still be affected during the review process by the censors. This is because the reporting mechanism needs time to respond, and other users can still view the content if it has not been identified as harmful. In this case social media platforms need a stricter automatic blocking system to check the compliance of tweets. In that way, the content push can be reduced in the first time and the platform will reduce the potential harmful of comments [17]. Although freedom of expression is a fundamental human right in many countries, there is no absolute freedom in today's society governed by the rule of law. Fake news containing harmful remarks not only damages the credibility of the media but also may disturb social order, so it should be regulated.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of social media has provided an efficient communication platform for the rapid flow of information and generated a huge information ecosystem. In this ecosystem, everyone's participation plays an important role. Each of our likes, comments and retweets is an interaction of information dissemination. With such a diverse range of information, if we only passively accept in each interaction without confirming its source and authenticity, there is a greater probability that fake news will be disseminated. So, it is not just social media that needs to take responsibility for censoring fake news - we as users need to do the same. For users of social media, it is important to improve Digital Literacy. It means giving users tools to identify misinformation online in order to mitigate their impacts. At the same time, users also need to improve their critical thinking and read articles with critical mind. We should get into the habit of browsing social media and actively analyzing whether the information we are interacting with is one of the six types of fake news, and subconsciously checking the reliability of the sources. Social media should also maintain existing censorship mechanisms and enhance the accuracy of algorithms that automatically block fake news. It takes a concerted effort to counteract the spread of fake news and we need to work together to

create a positive information ecosystem. Because of the small number of social media platforms chosen for discussion in this article, it is not feasible to cover in detail all the methods used to combat fake news on the remaining social media platforms not mentioned in the article. The existing methods on each platform also need to be improved and future research could suggest more advanced enhancements to existing methods by analyzing the underlying logic of how fake news and social media operate.

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