



Fighting fabrications

As misinformation and disinformation continue to spread, society needs new and old solutions in the search for truth

The world is engaged in a fight for truth.

Where should we turn and who should we believe? If we look to governments to tell us what we can and can't say, we could be driving toward authoritarianism. But if we look to the mob for cues, we're at risk of going down the road to totalitarianism.

For more information, go to worldethicaldata.org and mediamonitoring.africa.org.

"I've been intrigued by the weaponising of social media by politicians across Africa," says John Marshall, Director of the World Ethical Data Foundation and CEO of the World Ethical Data Forum. "One of the things worth mentioning, besides the distinction between the epistemological problem of fake news and disinformation and the apparent erosion of the authority of evidence, is the grave problem of how this fact is seized upon by governments and those in power to work political effects and advantages."

While Marshall doesn't believe that absolute agreement in politics is necessary or even desirable, he believes that all of us, no matter where we are in the world, must ask ourselves over and over again how much we can know on our own and how much we can responsibly delegate. He describes this as "a non-trivial problem", especially when it depends upon authority, upon trustworthy institutions, and upon evidence.

Given the increasing complexity of the world, Marshall also believes that disinformation is something we have to recognise poses different risks to different political systems and different people for different reasons. "It's paradoxical that illiteracy is a precondition for direct exposure to disinformation, but perhaps the only protection against it," he says.

These problems place a question mark on whether we can treat misinformation, disinformation, and fake news under the same label. Disinformation and



12

The number of days late the Russian team was for the 1908 Olympics because they used the wrong calendar.

1,560

The number of words in the Eminem hit *Rap God*.

misinformation have a rigorous way of being broken down, while ‘fake news’ is one of the most dangerous terms and also the least clear. That’s why we have to be careful to identify the causes, rather than the effects.

Getting the balance right

To play its part, Twitter deployed hybrid solutions to get the balance right. Specifically, these are about removing harmful information while also promoting credible sources. More than that, it’s about finding the balance between supporting innovation and stifling the spread of misinformation, all with the aim of using the power of an open internet to bring about positive change.

“Civil society makes up a large part of our engagement and we have different procedures on how to support and protect civil society organisations,” says Emmanuel Lubanzadio, Twitter’s Head of Public Policy for Sub-Saharan Africa. “We only engage with governments that have been considered democratic, open, and supportive of society.”

One of the reasons this problem is so challenging, but also so compelling, is because it brings together different fields of knowledge. And, while many individuals and entities are engaged in looking at the social media space, it’s important not to forget that there’s still a large and incredibly important realm where people are exchanging views person to person – through the radio, and so on.

“The problem is different in different countries, communities, and even down to cities, regions, and individual neighbourhoods,” says Daniel Kimmage, Principal Deputy Coordinator of the US Global Engagement Center, which was created with a mission of directing, leading, and coordinating efforts to counter propaganda and disinformation by state and non-state actors.

Accepting individual responsibility

While it’s difficult to assess news dispassionately, especially when it can be consciously or subconsciously sensationalised by the media, Marshall believes that consensus is possible. Indeed, if we agree that free society is something desirable, it’s something we have to achieve not by force or fraud but by the effort of people who are actively engaged with the issues.

The great horror – which is also a great joy to some – is that understanding cannot be attained passively. After all, it’s easy to be scandalised; you don’t require active or critical engagement with a piece of content or news to be shocked by it. But one of the reasons that liberal democracies are so robust is that they recognise their fallibility. Closing down opposition is contrary to the spirit that helped give rise to the civilisations we most look to.

“We have to be careful about the holistic nature of technology as it currently is, and especially the holistic nature of the sort of semantics we’re involved in

Vaccine facts



William Bird is the Director of Media Monitoring Africa (a media watchdog and NGO) and is both an Ashoka and Linc fellow – both in recognition of his work focused on children and the media.

What causes disinformation to spread?

For disinformation to resonate, it needs to trigger emotions and have a grain of truth to it. So, when it comes to vaccines, people may have legitimate concerns about side effects, especially with something new. It becomes easy to tap into that and create an extreme version, which suggests you might die or lose control of parts of your body and its functions. Many of these ideas don’t seem to be original but are instead imported from the US. Local spreaders then change some of the ideas to make the villains resonate more clearly with our context.

How is misinformation spreading?

Social media is undoubtedly the biggest means by which conspiracy theories spread. But they are also spread by personal networks aided and abetted by the algorithms of the platforms that prioritise content that elicits strong emotional responses. All of these in turn are reinforced by the echo chambers carefully curated by the platforms. Of course, those who tend to disbelieve science or who don’t believe in facts are likely more at risk. But, because clever disinformation ties into deep-seated views or fears, almost anyone is susceptible.

What can we do to protect ourselves from fake news?

Fortunately, there are lots of tips and things you can do to protect yourself from falling for it, like downloading the NewsRover app or using Real411 to report false information. Always look for credible sources and consume content from a diversity of credible media. If something makes you angry or anxious, check it out. If you cannot verify it on credible sites, don’t share it with your networks.

when it comes to misinformation and disinformation,” Marshall says. “What I sincerely believe is called for is not so much a stripping away of knowledge but a repositioning of ourselves in relation to it.”

Text | Eugene Yiga Photography | Shyrtartanya