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New media, digital literacy and the mechanics of trust

Ibrar Bhatt and Alison MacKenzie   25 January 2020

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The highly networked nature of our informational ecosystem facilitates the mass transmission of false information and nurtures and exploits digital ignorance on a mass scale. While many of us embraced the internet for its democratising and civic potential in the 1990s, we are now realising and confronting the consequences that new media has for collective and individual epistemic practices in the lives of everyday users of technology.

Politically and economically motivated actors are taking advantage of our new media environments to make it much more difficult to distinguish between truth and lies, and fact and fiction.

Searching for truth online can be, as the comedian David Mitchell has **said**, like looking for a piece of hay in a haystack – not even a needle. Digital ignorance is rife and higher education institutions have a vital role to play in safeguarding the seeking of truth, as truth is central to the integrity and well-being of the individual, the nation and to the proper functioning of democracy.

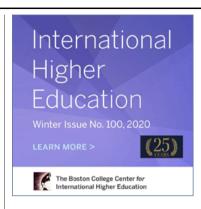**Echo chambers and knowledge bubbles**

Not only have we seen a massive increase in the volume of information in digital environments, but the ecosystem in which it operates has also become increasingly **balkanised**. Trapped within echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, networks of users will mostly consume information that conforms to their existing world view and conflicting perspectives, even if they are authoritative, are suppressed or simply removed.

Users are increasingly reliant on algorithms and their own social media networks. But the problem with algorithms is that they do not vet content for truthfulness. Rather, they deliberately **amplify** the type of content that keeps users engaged, using stories and framings that appeal to people's baser instincts, triggering outrage, fear, arousal and-or humour.

This is why, on YouTube, alongside reasoned accounts of a particular topic, users will also see recommendations to watch videos by conspiracy theorists, extremist content and anti-scientific content.

Take vaccination-related content: Platforms like YouTube are very likely to link both scientifically grounded opinion and anti-vaccination videos together as ostensibly two valid and equal sides of opinion to be viewed. The tragic impact is that there are now measles outbreaks in Western countries where the virus had previously been eradicated.

In fact, overall, conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination videos outperform more reasoned alternative content on YouTube, for the reasons already **highlighted** – that when it comes to information online, lies spread faster than truth.

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Biased search terms

Also, take a typical approach to online searches conducted by perfectly reasonable people acting in good faith: what begins with a query or question will not yield equal or neutral results. There are many search terms for which, at a given time, the available relevant information is limited, non-existent or just deeply prejudicial in its framing.

Online content around the phrase 'black on white crime', for example, or something like 'Did the Holocaust exist?' is likely created by those who have an extremist or racist perspective.

These phrases are initially obscure with little available information online. Dubbed as **'data voids'**, they are exploited by media manipulators who will galvanise content around such phrases, then work to push those very phrases into the mainstream lexicon by using news media's instinct to cover something new – exploiting the dependence and inclination of both search and social media platforms to favour content that is fresh over that which is true.

Therefore, our choices, including the very phrases we use to search for information, are not just dependent on the information available to us but also on what has entered into our lexicon. If the information is incorrect, distorted by lies or prejudicial in its very framing, a person will make a poor choice; or, at least, it will not be the choice they thought they were making.

The white supremacist shooter **Dylann Roof** regularly visited sites through searching for 'black-on-white crime' via Google. Would he have still committed the atrocity had he visited more reasoned analyses of crime in the United States which show that crime is largely intra-racial? We simply do not know.

Chillingly, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* that the criminality of the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin was widely known – and still commanded mass support.

Support for false stories, obviously fake news and leaders of doubtful moral rectitude cannot be explained by ignorance, apathy, stupidity and propaganda alone. The fervour with which these stories are taken up may be accounted for by the need for definitive and simple answers, the allaying of fears (of what 'causes' autism, for example), isolation and strong identification with movements that rely on a single message ('Get Brexit Done' or 'MAGA' – Make American Great Again).

When the information ecosystem is influenced by corporate interests and freely manipulated by cynically motivated people, we cannot help but ask: is free choice online actually free? And does free speech online equate to free reach?

Digital ignorance and trust online

The dissemination of false or misleading news, lies and **bullshit** or the fact that there is widespread ignorance are hardly new. Ignorance is inevitable – we are creatures with finite amounts of time and we cannot know everything, so we have to be strategic in our online choices and consumption of information.

Ignorance, however, is also fuelled by **'epistemic vices'** such as *closed-mindedness, epistemic arrogance, dogmatism, over-confidence* and *wishful thinking*, all of which have an ancient pedigree. But we need to understand these online practices better and how they are being played out in everyday life.

Examining **digital ignorance** and epistemic dependence online is

essential to understanding how *trust* is accorded in online practice. The focus on 'fact-checking' is not wrong, it is just not dealing with the core of the issue, which is not facts and fabrications per se, but how people accord trust, and whom and what they trust online.

For students to become insightful and credible graduates, they must have the awareness to recognise when their attention is being co-opted or siloed, for what purpose and with what consequence. And we must help them to develop a sense of digital literacy which has *epistemic freedom* at its core, rather than a mere procedural understanding of technology.

Higher education should help students differentiate between epistemic vices in order to nurture epistemic virtue, and teach the importance of interrogating the different ways that authority and power hide, get hidden and subvert knowledge creation and truth. This kind of perspective on digital literacy is essential, for a mere procedural understanding of technology is simply not enough.

In a recent special issue of the journal *Postdigital Science and Education* we brought together a series of scholars from a variety of disciplines to deal with some of these issues. As guest editors, we asked researchers to consider what the intrinsic differences between lies, bullshit and fake news stories are and how they can insinuate their way into our belief systems through everyday internet use.

The papers gathered in the **collection** open with two commentaries on the nature of *truth*. Also included within the issue: an **examination of the infrastructural logics** of platforms such as Twitter; a **case study of fake news** surrounding Spanish immigration; an **exploration of the relationship** between fake news and parody; and a **philosophical analysis** of how 'naïve scepticism', a willingness to endorse unsupported scepticism, predisposes online users to 'bullshit openness'.

For the complete list of scholarly contributions to the special issue see the following link:
https://link.springer.com/journal/42438/2/1

*Ibrar Bhatt is lecturer in education at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the governing council of the Society for Research into Higher Education. He specialises in research and teaching related to language and new media, literacy and higher education. You can follow his tweets at **@ibrar_bhatt**. E-mail: **i.bhatt@qub.ac.uk**. **Alison MacKenzie** is lecturer in education at Queen's University Belfast. Her academic background is in philosophy of education, and how injustice and inequality are reproduced and sustained by forms of ignorance, testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. E-mail a.mackenzie@qub.ac.uk.*

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