The Age of Disinformation

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©THOMAS J FROEHLICH, PH.D.
EMERITUS PROFESSOR
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION
KENT STATE UNIVERSITY
KENT OH 44240

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Disclaimer

- This presentation contains contentious political content.
- I have taken a perspective on the issues that does not accord with other political views in the US. But one of the major roles of a professor to profess, to assert a position based on research and evidence.
- This lecture does not represent the School of Information of Kent State University or that of Kent State University
- Whether or not you have alternative viewpoints, I encourage you to contact me and challenge my position or to have me clarify my position if you find something problematic.
- If you send me email (tfroehli@kent.edu), I will strive to make a reasoned response, given that your concerns are based on facts, reason and evidence (for example, in making a different interpretation of events).
- Contrary to good pedagogical policy, my lectures are dense. My purpose is to allow you to return to the slides and review the arguments, so you do not have remember the detail of PowerPoints. So to follow along now or to review the content, please go to: **tinyurl.com/j2zscr3z** or http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/pakistan.pdf for a pdf file of the presentation.

Introduction

- The major issue confronting information and media professionals and democracies around the world is the success of disinformation and misinformation campaigns
- To be clear, what is at stake is the survival of American democracy and most democracies around the world, that depend on genuine information and recognition of the authoritativeness of certain information sources.
- This presentation uses as a basis the current political issues in America; unfortunately, the use of disinformation and misinformation campaigns to gain, expand and exploit political power seems to be another unfortunate American export to the world, following the export of laissez-fare capitalism that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing – that profit trumps human dignity.
- We live in a heavily polarized society, and evidence suggests the most extensive blame lies on the political right, its media, and its echo-system, at least in the US
- It is an Age of Disinformation, because disinformation/misinformation is claimed to be legitimate information, that one's partisan political perspective is asserted to be the only truthful one, that all other claims are fake news, that scientific knowledge is mere opinion which is trumped by one's political agenda, and there is an attack on credible news sources and the rejection of genuine expertise. For more detail, see http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/intro.pdf.

The Disinformation Ecology

While we have to be careful with absolute differentiations, there are two major kinds of information seekers in the Age of Disinformation:

(1) Those that live in a closed propaganda feedback loop, filter bubble or disinformation ecology and

(2) those that don't, those who are open to considering different perspectives on an issue and willing to learn and understand different parts of an issue. The major emphasis in the presentation is the former, and what we can try to do about it.

- Contrary to any evidence, why do we have 70% of Republicans still believing that the election was stolen from Trump or that COVID-19 is a hoax and refuse to get vaccinated? That the January 6 insurrection was a tourist visit of patriots to the Capitol?
- They don't live in an alternate reality, because it is not a reality based in orthodox perception, science, evidence, facts, or reason.
- They live in a political filter bubble that dictates what they believe, what they perceive, what they regard as legitimate sources of information or who are proper authorities, and more importantly what sources of information are to be rejected.
- On the next page is the projected outline of my proposed book, looking at the factors that shape the first group or disinformation-misinformation ecology and then looking at the possibilities of getting those open to learning to acquire critical skills to survive in the Age of Disinformation

Outline of Twelve Lessons
for the Age of Disinformation

The twelve lessons are:

[Understanding those in the Disinformation/Misinformation Ecology]

(1) The Age of Disinformation;

(2) The varieties of false information;

(3) Knowledge, opinion, belief and second-hand knowledge;

(4) Deception, self-deception, social self-deception and collective self-deception.

(5) Gullibility, cognitive biases, and other psychological factors in information or disinformation ecologies;

(6) Authentic and false cognitive authorities;

(7) Social media;

[Rational Approaches for the Receptive to learning]

(8) Ethics, logic and political discourse

(9) Information literacy and information ethics

(10) Media literacy and media ethics;

(11) Digital literacy and digital ethics;

[Undermining Choice and Critical Thinking]

[12] Persuasive Technologies.

Afterword: from the Age of Distraction to the Age of Inflamed Grievances.

The Age of Disinformation

- We cannot go through this outline in any detail. It is still a work in progress. While it is a little dated, you can review my work at
- http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/, particularly http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/workshop.html (which reflects a lot of the content mentioned here, but the latter chapters have a lot of new content)

The Age of Disinformation – 5 significant characteristics

(1) The assertion of false equivalences: that everyone is entitled to their opinion, and all opinions are equally valid - however, this is not true, as some opinions have a foundation in facts, evidence and reason and others do not

(2) disinformation and misinformation are come to be taken as real information

(3) reliable and verifiable information sources are rejected as "fake news"

(4) science and expertise are reduced to alternative opinions;

(5) the common good is discarded in the face of toxic individualism
   see http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/intro.pdf

The Varieties of Ignorance and False Information

There a variety of ignorance and false information on the internet, including lies per se (hallmark of the Trump presidency), ignorance per se, misinformation, paltering, disinformation, missing information, malinformation or doxing, and fake news. For characterizations, see: *http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/varieties.pdf*

Three points:
(1) Some of these are redundant or overlap (paltering = missing information, malinformation = doxing)

(2) many of these forms of false information are put into the service of disinformation (misinformation with the intent to deceive)

(3) "Fake News:" used in two ways:
- for the disinformation ecology, it stands for all sources of information that run contrary to their cognitive authorities (e.g., Fox News);
- for those connected to actual evidence and facts, all those cognitive authorities (e.g., Fox News) who use misinformation and disinformation are supposed to substitute for facts and evidence

Knowledge, Opinion, Belief And Second-hand Knowledge

- Our cognitive states are be roughly seen as: Knowledge, Belief, or Opinion. People, especially political partisans confuse these and are led to confuse these
- Knowledge: justified true belief
- Belief
  - True belief: e.g., there was a COVID-19 pandemic in 2020
  - False belief: e.g., Trump won the election in 2020
- Opinion: e.g., Lady Gaga is a better singer than Judy Garland. There are preferences for which one can make an argument, but as such, they are neither true or false.
- It would be helpful to develop a robust communication model so we can see how cognitive beliefs (true or false) are transferred from sender/creators of messages and receivers
  - Creators/Senders of messages, their cognitive state and their intentions
  - Messages and variety of their forms
  - Receivers, their intentions and predispositions and cognitive state
- Cognitive Authorities' role in the transfer of knowledge, belief and opinion in communication. We are more willing to accept information as true if it comes from what or whom we regard as an authoritative source: e.g., *Fox News* vs *New York Times*
- For further details see: http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/beliefs.pdf

Communication Model

- Creators/Senders, their cognitive state and their intentions. Senders can be teachers, friends, news media or social media. Each of these exist in a cognitive state, for each of different areas of concern, such as politics or medicine: knowledge, opinion, belief – true or false. And what they may be trying to communicate may be the same kind of information, though their cognitive biases and intention may be at variance with what they believe they know: while knowing something to false belief, they nonetheless try to communicate it as knowledge so as to retain power or control while deceiving their receivers.
  - Authentic example:
    - Creator/Sender: Legitimate news source, such as NY Times,
    - Cognitive state: Knowledge or well-informed belief or opinion (editorial) based on verified or verifiable information of evidence
    - Intention: to communicate information, to inform about a specific issue or event, which may be part of a political agenda, but based on a reasonable interpretation of an issue or events
  - Problematic example:
    - Creator/Sender: Questionable news source, such as Fox News pundits like Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson,
    - Cognitive state: Commitment to in an alt-right political viewpoint – could be true belief or false belief or an opinion, based on partial evidence or made-up evidence and occasionally true belief – unreliable hodge-podge of disinformation, misinformation, partial or selective information
    - Intention: to convince acceptance of an interpretation of a specific issue or event as part of a political agenda or viewpoint (see https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/)
- Messages and variety of their forms: news reports, memes (a trend or idea or symbolic gesture that spreads quickly), narratives, Facebook postings, videos, tropes, etc.
- Receivers, their intentions and predispositions and cognitive state (next slide)

Communication Model

- Receivers, their intentions and predispositions and cognitive state.

  There are receivers who anticipate the message as being knowledge, opinion, or belief - true or false, and will accept it in one of these forms, depending on their intention and cognitive biases. One of the factors that heavily influences the acceptance of information on the part of consumers (of whatever character) is whether source is authoritative or not. For example, if we hear various bits of information from our preferred news sources, we are inclined to take it as knowledge or right opinion, based on our beliefs about that authority.

  - Authentic example:
    - Receiver: reader of NY Times, trying to gain understanding of an issue:
    - Cognitive state: well-informed belief or orthodox opinion
    - Intention: to gain a better understanding of an issue, probably with a degree of confirmation bias; a Fox News viewer, for example, could receive it as a false belief or opinion (fake news)
  - Problematic example:
    - Receiver: Fox News viewer
    - Cognitive State: could be true belief or false belief or an opinion, but embraced as true belief, even knowledge, often grounded in an emotional mooring: grievances, fear, resentment
    - Intention: to stoke or further confirm their confirmation bias about information supporting a political agenda or viewpoint, with little regard to actual evidence. E.g., the authority trumps the message. Alternative news sources and authorities are summarily rejected (disconfirmation bias).

- For a more elaborated model, see http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/media.literacy.pdf

Communication Model

- Our cognitive biases can predispose how we receive the information.
- Based on our prior knowledge what we generally receive is rarely knowledge per se, but belief, sometimes true and sometimes false.
- What the consumer receives is true belief if they have the background of the subject or they can do the education or research to verify it.
- It may be a false belief, held as true, which cannot be converted into knowledge through experience, education or research.
- There are also opinions about subjects which are matters of taste or preference, about which one can make arguments, but about which those arguments are not definitive.
- What complicates matters is how we gain knowledge or true beliefs or false beliefs, even opinions, even imaginings (QAnon).
- Some of our knowledge is gained by experience or research and some of it is second-hand knowledge gained through the knowledge or experience of others.
- Before we turn to the issue of second-hand knowledge and how it is acquired through cognitive authorities, we should look at the psychological conditions that facilitate the acceptance of false beliefs or opinions.

Psychological Factors: Deception, Self-deception, Social Self Deception, Collective Self-Deception

- In order for deception to work, one must be willing to be self-deceived. Self-deception is a socializing and socialized strategy. We convince ourselves of our false beliefs as we convince others, and vice versa. This reciprocity is social self-deception. It is a very effective reinforcer in a disinformation echo-system, filter bubble or disinformation ecology. Constant repetition reinforces the belief that a lie or disinformation is true.

- Collective self-deception elevates social self-deception into group behavior: e.g., alt-right world view, articulated by its media (Fox News, OANN, Newsmax), its politicians and party.

- For more details, see: http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/deception1.pdf

Psychological Factors:
Information Avoidance and Gullibility

Information Avoidance

- Information avoidance as "any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information" (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).

Gullibility:

- Gullibility is "a failure of social intelligence in which a person is easily tricked or manipulated into an ill-advised course of action" (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019, p. 2).

- Gullibility can occur in one of two situations: "Either an individual's beliefs are manifestly inconsistent with facts and reality, or an individual's beliefs are at variance with social norms about reality" (p. 2).

- The psychological foundation of gullibility "appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality" (p. 5).

- Cognitive biases are another way of see these defects in reasoning

Psychological Factors: Cognitive Biases

- Cherry [2020] defines cognitive bias as "a systematic error in thinking that occurs when people are processing and interpreting information in the world around them."

- People typically allow their cognitive biases to dictate their thinking, opinions, and actions when they must make quick assessments.

- Other factors that invoke cognitive biases include a person's emotions or motivations, the limits on the mind's ability to process information, and social pressures (Cherry, 2020).

- There are many pertinent cognitive biases have particular relevance for disinformation adherents. Two of two dominant ones are:
  - Confirmation bias involves interpreting information that supports one's existing beliefs, even when presented with conflicting evidence.
  - Disconfirmation bias occurs when "we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial." (Mooney, 2011). Trump: all news that does not support his agenda is "fake news."

- Other cognitive biases that facilitate membership in a disinformation-misinformation ecology: the availability heuristic, attentional bias, illusory truth, affect bias, negativity bias, anchoring, the bandwagon effect, stereotyping, ingroup bias, projection bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect, and the self-serving bias, many of which are related. See my Trump paper https://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs/74337.pdf for details.

Cognitive Authorities

- One of the key dimensions in the acceptance or rejection of information is due to cognitive authorities.

- When one lacks experience, education, or knowledge, or does not have the time or inclination to acquire such, a cognitive authority is a person, organization, media source, group, or leader whose information one takes as second-hand knowledge based on that entity's credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability. One can be mistaken about whether the authority is sound or not, whether what is being conveyed is knowledge or false information.

- As we grow up and as we live, we cannot experience everything and so some of what we know is taken from individuals (e.g. father, mother, friends, leader), groups (e.g., classmates), or institutions (e.g., schools, books).

- For this lecture, the focus is on news sources including social media, political leaders, political parties, and religious leaders).

Patrick Wilson and Second-Hand Knowledge

- Patrick Wilson wrote a work called *Second-hand knowledge - an inquiry into cognitive authority* in 1983 which promoted a variety of notions.

- He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways:

  (1) We can construct first-hand knowledge based on our experience. Unfortunately, our experience is limited.

  (2) We can construct knowledge from or through others, second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others

- If we have questions about political issues and are not well versed in the area, we are inclined to ask a friend, associate, or other person who is knowledgeable in that area – they become our cognitive authority on that topic, assuming that they are trustworthy, credible and have a level of expertise.

- We can have many cognitive authorities based on various topics of concern

- My use of cognitive authority expands Patrick Wilson's original characterization.

Cognitive Authorities

- Cognitive authority is related to credibility, competence, and trustworthiness.

- Credibility is not a simple judgment, though it is claimed to be "intuitive." According to Rieh (2010) , there are two key dimensions for credibility: trustworthiness and expertise.

- Cognitive authorities can be friends, colleagues, peers, news media, Internet blogs, Twitter feeds, news channels, social media sites, etc.

- Examples of cognitive authorities are news sites representing different points of a political spectrum: e.g., Fox News or MSNBC.

- They can also be religious "authorities" as well: e.g., white evangelicals

- For news sites, the measure of their credibility or trustworthiness is related to consumer loyalty. This observation is true for both authentic and pseudo- or false cognitive authorities.

- To compare true and false cognitive authorities, we can appeal to the principles of good journalism

Principles of Good Journalism

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain in an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
6. It must provide a form for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal Gramick conscience.
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news. https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/

The focus will be the treatment of Donald Trump throughout his presidency and attempts to get reelected

What Readers/Viewers *Believe*

New York Times	Fox News
Center-left bias (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.	Strongly right bias (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com) Because they have a bias does not mean that their reporting is not grounded in facts.
Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Possesses expertise; they provide information that is accurate and valid
Real News (other sources have to be assessed for their credibility or expertise)	Real News (all others are Fake News)

New York Times: Actuality

New York Times	Basis for their Authority
Center-left bias (mediabiasfactcheck.com)	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion
Trustworthy "captures the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	Long history (1851) as a respected publication. Articles are well-researched and verified. Opinion is identified as opinion (editorials).
Possesses expertise: they provide information that is accurate and valid	Produces (1) second-hand knowledge, (2) well-informed opinion (with which others may disagree: e.g., Trickle-down economics is not successful), and (3) preferences (best movies to watch)
Adheres to the principles of good journalism: (https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/)	Has a cadre of respected and experienced experts. When they become aware of false or problematic statements or reporting, they issue retractions
For a measured assessment, see: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/new-york-times/	Believe in fact-finding and verification by multiple sources

Fox News: Actuality

Fox News	Basis for their Authority
Strong right bias (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com). For a measured assessment see: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fox-news/	Having a political leaning does not invalidate the content, particularly because opinion pieces are published as opinion
They claim that they are trustworthy implying that they stand for "the perceived goodness and morality of the source (Rieh, 2010, p. 1337).	It has a long history associated with right and conservative causes, a history which has been often shaky and scandalous, with commentators leaving (e.g., Bill O'Reilly) for various reasons, often sexual harassment. (Stelter, 2020; Smith, 2019). Many of their sources are conspiracy theories from alt-right web sites.
Possesses expertise: they purport to provide information that is accurate and valid	They have various pundits, Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al., who claim to be experts, but they are mostly apologists for ring-wing viewpoints. Its second-hand knowledge on political matters, is often at best opinion or opinion based on alternative "facts" or misconstrued data.

Fox News: Actuality

Principles of Good Journalism	Basis for their Authority
The obligation to present the truth (or the best representation thereof, by providing evidence and upgrading narrative as facts and errors emerge)	For four straight months in 2019, they pushed misinformation every single day (Sulivan, 2019). Trump's failure or incompetence in dealing with the coronavirus epidemic was never mentioned, and in fact he was praised for his superior leadership.
Its first loyalty is to citizens	Their loyalty is toward its partisan viewers, not to all citizens, though they hope to convert them.
Practitioners must maintain an independence of those they cover	The most obvious case is that of Donald Trump. They never criticized his speech or behavior and claim the he is the best president that the US has ever had. He frequently was invited or invited himself for interviews. Their relationship is so close that Fox News was often referred to as "Trump TV."
Serve as an independent monitor of power	See the above; most commentary and commentators support right-wing causes: unfettered capitalism, oligarchy, pro-business, anti-labor agenda, etc. They endorse the Republican party and the Trump agenda, often ignoring previous principles of conservatism (e.g., anti-communism, fiscal responsibility).

Fox News: Actuality

Principles of Good Journalism	Basis for their Authority
Must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise	They rarely invite speakers, politicians or commentators from the Democrats or the left. They also refused to run advertisements that are critical of the president or right-wing agenda
Must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant	They are committed to reporting or making narratives that support the biases of their viewers, a right-wing or conservative viewpoint (which has been muddled).
Must keep the news interesting and proportional. This means that one does not sensationalize certain events and ignoring others, stereotyping or being overly negative – all affected communities and perspectives must be taken in account.	They are often committed to sensationalism, such as fear of migrants, fear of communism and socialism, turning peaceful protests into riots against law and order, etc. For an overview of a variety of issues see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fox_News_controversies
Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. For a complete table comparison, see: Froehlich (2021), "Philosophical Musings…" https://informatio.fic.edu.uy/index.php/informatio/article/view/313/334, p. 143ff	When reporting, one should include their viewpoint reflecting their own moral conscience. Certainly, many of Fox News pundits do so: Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Jeanine Pirro, Neil Cavuto, et al. take that view, but there are serious questions about a moral compass that approves of children in cages, that support a continuous liar (20,000+ lies by Trump or misleading information until July 13, 2020 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-20000-false-or-misleading-claims/) or ignore, hide or manipulate relevant information.

The Persistence of Fox News

A study Pew undertook in the fall of 2019 gives a more up-to-date understanding of Fox News viewers. It concluded:

1. Around four-in-ten Americans trust Fox News. Nearly the same share distrust it.
2. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust Fox News more than any other outlet. Democrats distrust it more than any other outlet.
3. People who cite Fox News as their main source of political news are older and more likely to be white than U.S. adults overall.
   1. Americans ages 65 and older account for around four-in-ten of those who say their main source is Fox News (37%), compared with 21% of all adults.
4. Around nine-in-ten who turn to Fox News (87%) identify their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic white, compared with 65% of all adults. (Gramlich, 2020)
5. Those who name Fox News as their main source of political news stand out from the general public in their views on key issues and people, including President Donald Trump. (Gramlich, 2020)

People who get their news from outlets other than Fox generally said, even as early as March 2020, that Trump was not responding to the COVID-19 pandemic well, but 63% of Fox News viewers said that Trump was doing an "excellent job" responding to the outbreak (Gramlich, 2020).

These observations serve to show the extent of the power of Fox News to influence, even brainwash, its consumers.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

- It starts with or instills a maelstrom of grievances, resentments, a sense of invisibility or a lack of importance felt by their viewers (also cultivated by their authorities: e.g., they are discriminated as Christians), where the wider culture often challenges many of their core values (e.g., white dominance). It creates or inflames the grievances, resentments, anger of its viewers and enslaves them to emotional triggers.

- Fox News then tells those viewers what they want to hear, consciously or unconsciously, with claims that support and fulfill their cognitive biases and real, instilled or professed ideology. For example, they may think of themselves as conservatives, without having much depth about its meaning, except maintaining things as they were (e.g., male white dominance in society). Fox News will then shape and enlarge that image with anti-liberal, anti-labor, pro-business, pro-average-joe narratives.

- Their messages are myths, tropes, and narratives, often detailed through the shows of their various pundits. They include persistent myths about antifa conspiracies, fast fixes or lies about the coronavirus epidemic or the extraordinary leadership of Trump or the stolen election.

The Nature of Fox's Cognitive Authority

- Fox News (primarily before and during the Trump presidency – but also echoed on OANN (One America News Network) and Newsmax) exists as a significant component of a disinformation-misinformation ecology composed of like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits which foster, nurture and reinforce one's grievances through memes, narratives, tropes and stories. It is a major component of a "propaganda feedback loop," where each part reinforces (and often inflames) the others, through multiple channels (Cable news, social media, religious leaders and organizations, group associations, party rallies, word-of-mouth, etc.) that are echoing and reinforcing each other.

- The conclusion is Fox News is a *pseudo- or false cognitive authority,* one that pretends, fosters and succeeds in being an faux authority, but that pretends to be objective, trustworthy, and have expertise, but one that lacks a legitimate foundation.

- For further detail, see: http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/CA.pdf

Strata in the Closed Propaganda Feedback Loop

- Before proceeding it is important to note that those in the filter bubble belong to different strata: while there are a range of adherents, we can sort out sort out three different levels:

- Those at the top who claim to be cognitive authorities: political leaders (e.g., Trump and Republican governmental officials at all levels), religious leaders (e.g., white evangelicals), media (Fox News, OANN, Newsmax, QAnon), Social media (Tucker Carlson), Republican Party. They spread the gospel of hatred, grievances, anger, and fear control the group. They have completely abandoned democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law.

- Those in the middle: true believers in the alt-right agenda who are vocal (even outraged, e.g., when asked to wear a mask against COVID-19) and whose emotional triggers are manipulated to have them stay committed to the propaganda of their cognitive authorities (news media, political leader, religious authority). They contain single-issue voters: gun rights, abortion, etc.

- Those at the bottom who are followers because their social standing is affected or their need to adhere to beliefs their friends and associates embrace. They are followers hood-winked into following mass social self-deception.

- There is a general effect of constant assaults of disinformation – even among those that are aware of these assaults. They have the effect of undermining democracy, for there is a need to tune-out of the constant barrage and not to follow one's belief system because of constant emotional exhaustion. To that end, the disinformation campaigns in America have been facilitated by Russia and China, who are interested in showing that democracies are failed political systems.

Right media versus left media

- The difference between a legitimate cognitive authority and a false one is the intention, actions, reporting and verification follow the principles of good journalism; the false one is built around a political ideology, with the intent to deceive and manipulate its consumers to make money and addict them through emotional manipulation of their various cognitive biases to cement them to a singular world view.

- In general, the left is not as engaged or manipulated, seduced by such strategies on the right.

- The behavior of the right-wing media ecosystem represents a radicalization of roughly a third of the American media system. The right and alt-right made polarization a winning strategy, especially for the last several political cycles

- Benkler et al. (2018, p. 14)) believe that the research they performed generally indicated that the left was less susceptible to their biases and that the right sought confirmation bias to their preexisting beliefs.

- They conclude that "the right-wing media ecosystem differs categorically from the rest of the media environment," and has been much more susceptible to "disinformation, lies, and half-truths." As for Fox News' role in this, "we found Fox News accrediting and amplifying the excesses of the radical sites." (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 14). This includes Social Media

Social Media

- Social media sites can also act as cognitive authorities or pseudo-cognitive authorities

- The problem with the internet is that is a self-serve "information" bank. Using Google or some social media sites like https://www.adfontesmedia.com/interactive-media-bias-chart/ , one can often find legitimate and verifiable information.

- For many on the right, right-wing social media (e.g., Breitbart, Truthfeed, Infowars, Gateway Pundit, Zero Hedge, QAnon) is a self-serve disinformation or misinformation bank. Right-wing ideologues, foreign agents and click-bait entrepreneurs produce a deluge of disinformation of memes and narratives to solicit (at a minimum) and inflame (at a maximum) the disinformation seeker at these sites.

- Self-serve engagement is mediated by cognitive bias, confirmation bias, and steerage to selective sources. Generally, there are little restrictions on the kind of content that is made available.

- Conservatives are more susceptible to clickbait than liberals, more likely to fall for fake news. (Ingraham, 2019).

Social Media

Beyond specific right-wing media sources, as political commentator and professor Robert Reich argued in the *Guardian,* Facebook and Twitter are alarmingly influential. As he wrote:

- The reason 45% of Americans rely on Facebook for news and Trump's tweets reached (when president) 66 million is because these platforms are near monopolies, dominating the information marketplace. No TV network, cable giant or newspaper even comes close. Fox News' viewership rarely exceeds 3 million. The New York Times has 4.7 million subscribers.
- Facebook and Twitter aren't just participants in the information marketplace. They're quickly *becoming the information marketplace.* (Reich, 2019).

One of the most problematic aspects of social media are the number of hate groups and the far-right partisans that use it to attract followers and disseminate their propaganda.

Social Media

- YouTube in particular engages a rabbit hole phenomenon that increases right-wing radical viewership.

- When perusing YouTube videos for particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the site's algorithm suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest more provocative videos to view.

- The impact is to advance Google's profits, with dire political consequences. Sociologist and information and library science professor Zeynep Tufekci declared YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" because of these mechanisms (Tufekci, 2018). According to the analysis of *New York Times* columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taum, Brazil's ultra-right president Jair Bolsonaro owes his electoral success primarily to ultra-right YouTube videos (Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Social Media and Free Speech

- While there are concerns for groups like 8chan and other alt-right sites, Facebook illustrates a broader problem of regulating speech on the internet, particularly hate speech or conspiracy theories.

- Perhaps the major problem with social media is the fact that anyone can use or create or propagate social media to disseminate clear lies and falsehoods on the internet in the name of intellectual freedom or freedom of expression.

- Mark Zuckerberg perhaps best exemplified this posture in a speech at Georgetown University where he argued that Facebook should be unfettered in intellectual freedom, including political advertisements of outright lies (e.g., pro-Trump reelection campaign advertisements that include lies about his opponents).

- He takes the view that the marketplace will work it out – the lies will be discovered, eventually rejected or ignored. He bases his argument, as do other free speech advocates, on the First Amendment.

Unregulated Platforms

- Harvard legal expert Yochai Benkler argues that Zuckerburg's interpretation of the First Amendment as preventing his company from suppressing false or dangerous speech is erroneous. He argues that the First Amendment is only about government involvement in speech; it does not apply to private speech or private parties, of which Twitter and Facebook are examples (Morrison, 2018).

- Evidence shows that untruths are not sorting themselves out in the disinformation-misinformation marketplace. Disinformation spreads unchecked by any retractions across the internet (and if even they occur, the first impression is what is originally remembered). Fox News, for example, echoed Trump's and his supporters' talking points, which are often patently false, but that is what is remembered (Affect Cognitive Bias)

- For a parallel discussion about intellectual freedom in libraries see: Swan, J. & Peattie, N. (1989). *The freedom to lie: a debate about democracy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers. Reissued in 2012.

Fairness Doctrine and Unregulated Platforms

- Obviously, it is nice to think that the truth will always win out. But in the Age of Disinformation, this approach seems too simplistic. Thus, we must ask, is there a limit to free expression when that expression leads to harmful acts to demonized populations, the destruction of trust in political, governmental and media institutions, the loss of expertise, and the denigration of science and evidence?

- Robert Reich (Reich, 2019) argues that two actions need to occur to bring rational control back to the internet.
  - First, there should be some anti-trust action that would break up the large providers, such as Facebook and Twitter. He argues that they have a too broad and monolithic influence.
  - Second, we must prevent such providers from pretending to be neutral providers of information for which they have no responsibility. If the New York Times is liable for the information it produces, internet service providers, so too should entities like Facebook and Twitter.

- For more detail, see: http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/social.media.pdf

Persuasive Technologies: Profiling

- As much as frightening it is for the alt-right to addict its disinformation adherents to their created or inflamed moral outrage, there is another subversion of human choice by the attention merchants of Silicon Valley.

- Wonderful insight about this topic is found in Netflix's documentary, *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). The following observations summarize some of its themes.

- Profiling. It should be no surprise the Silicon Valley tech companies, primarily Facebook, Apple and Google, can and do keep track of everything that anyone does online – what sites one visits and for how long, what images one looks at and for how long, what things one buys or are interested in, what friends one has, what "likes" (or its variations) one posts, who one phototags or is phototagged by, what engagement one has with what sites (how one navigates through a site, how long one stays on pages or subpages, what interactions one engages in, such as posting a comment, giving one's email address, engaging in a poll, clicking through links, etc. (all known as engagements). These are all fed into a profile that slowly builds over time, never disappears, and is continuously updated and refined. It is like taking every news story and changing it for where and who one is reading it, making the content of a news entry vary for each and every person.

Attention Merchants

- Profiling will not only predict one's behavior but also it will slowly begin to control one's behavior through psychological mechanisms.

- The purpose of attention merchants is not only to engage one's attention but also to promote addiction to technologies, sites and apps.

- For the surveillance capitalists, there are three goals: the engagement goal (keep the person engaged and wanting to return to a site), the growth goal (get the users to get others to join), and the advertising goal (to market and sell products) (Orlowski, 2020).

- These goals are driven by the desire to make money by attracting one's attention (which makes money from advertisers) or attracting one's consumption of products, goods and services.

- The problem is that there are no constraints on their money-making, despite its many damaging effects, such as adolescents cutting themselves or committing suicide for a lack of getting enough "likes" in Facebook and other apps.

- One should be aware about how one's attention is being squandered on things that don't matter, such as paying constant attention to email or text notifications?

- The smartphone is really a make-dumb phone. While for some issues, some insight can be gleaned through internet resources. But generally, it is a vehicle for distraction. While I might find out what actors were in *Gone with the Wind* (providing "facts" in a few keystrokes), how does help in deciding how to construct a meaningful life? Rather than promoting critical, long-range thinking – it provides uncritical thinking and a series of meaningless moments. It facilitates the squandering of one's attention.

- "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away." Pablo Picasso. Does the smartphone help you in finding your gift, but distract you from finding it? Or does it even avoid asking the question as you shop for more bargains at Amazon?

Uncontrolled Manipulation and Addiction Of Consumers

- *The Social Dilemma* ironically notes that even the people who developed the addicting software fell prey to the software, even knowing what was behind it.
- To one, the addiction was Twitter, to another email, to another Facebook.
- The addiction is based on positive intermittent reinforcement (adding a reward, such as financial gain or getting a "like" or heart emoji, in order to invoke a response).
- Like a gambling addict at a slot machine, when the last lever pull of the "one-arm bandit" did not succeed in a winning row, it entices the next lever pull by occasionally offering a win.
- Human vulnerabilities in psychology are exploited for monetary advantage, without regard to harmful effects.
- Particularly problematic is the harmful effects on adolescent psychology: fake popularity (getting not enough "likes") or snapshot dysmorphia (poor body image), often leading to depression or suicide, and a digital pacifier (escape from boredom) for all ages: from infants to adults – leading to passivity (Monroe, 2020)
- For example, every time you binge-watch a movie on Netflix or Amazon Prime (itself possibly an addiction), you are offered the reward of another movie similar to the one just seen so that one can binge on binge-watching.
- In a similar manner those addicted to right-wing (usually) "tribal partisan pornography" willingly go down the rabbit-hole of moral outrage to get another serotonin fix of smug self-righteousness.

Age of Surveillance Capitalism

The notion of the "Age of Surveillance Capitalism" was articulated and developed by Shoshana Zuboff, the Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*

- She believes that human beings' experiences are commodities that are and will be manipulated by international tech companies for exploitation and profit, overthrowing democracy. It is a bleak portrait, but given the current trends in psychological manipulation with no impetus to stop it, it does represent a possible and frightening future, where the whole world becomes inhabitants of Plato's Cave.

- Many unresearched adverse effects of social media and digital technologies are thrown upon the world because it makes money without concern about the long-range, not to mention the immediate impact, of those technologies.

- Particularly worrisome is the impact on ethical, political and human behavior

As noted at the beginning, we can roughly divide political information seekers into:

(a) those the live in a closed propaganda feedback loop or filter bubble who are nurtured and enslaved in their self-righteous anger, resentments or grievances (succumbing to their confirmation bias, disconfirmation bias and other cognitive biases). We might also include those enslaved to their persuasive technologies, who cannot muster the will to turn off their phone or retreat from the seductive engagements that promote a meaningless measure of self-worth (e.g., how many 'likes' or hearts we get).

(b) those who are open to learning how to find reliable information, to sort out disinformation and misinformation from verified and verifiable information on a particular political issue (trying to cope with the cognitive biases)

Strategies for Dealing with a Closed Propaganda Feedback Loop

To try to respond to disinformation seekers, one could undertake the roles that Socrates undertook in many of Plato's dialogs. If one just adamantly rejected the position of tribal partisan adherent, there would be an immediate rebuff (my opinion is as good as yours), leading to a further entrenchment in the given position. Rather than using direct confrontation, we can learn from Plato about how to get people to possibly change their minds.

In the Platonic/Socratic view of true learning, there are two aspects of the Socratic method of education.

(1) Benumbing or shocking the information seeker. In various Platonic dialogues, Socrates referred to as a stingray, electric eel or gadfly, shocking or benumbing his interlocutors into an awareness of their ignorance about a topic about which they think they possess knowledge (as Meno in the *Meno* believes he understands what virtue is all about). One ask questions of the information seeker, to let them see problems with their query (shocking them into an awareness of their ignorance) or to lead them to more reasonable sources. The purpose of this shock in the first aspect of the Socratic method is to clear away what one unidentified commentator referred to as "the conceit of false knowledge."

(2) Midwifery of ideas. In the second aspect, Socrates plays a midwife – using questions skillfully to have his interlocutors come to a self-realization of their true condition, guiding them to the birth of their ideas, leading them to insights about how the position may be improved or challenged. The important thing is that there is a process of self-discovery, not regurgitating the thoughts of others (e.g. Newsmax)

Socratic Approach

Depending on how deeply a patron is involved in the "closed propaganda feedback loop," one may be happy to achieve a state of benumbing the interlocuter into some awareness of their ignorance, that they can find no grounds for holding their position.

Three techniques may be helpful:

(1) Ask the disinformation adherent to articulate their position. If they find it difficult to explain the position that they hold, they may realize for themselves that there are flaws in their views. E.g., why do you think all Democrats are socialists or Social Security is not socialistic?

(2) Ask the patron to explain the position to which they object. E.g., what do you think a liberal stands for? In a similar manner, the patron may realize that they have created a caricature or straw man of their opponents, rather than real persons.

If the misinformation adherent is not so enveloped in their own anger, biases and resentments, one may be able to achieve more. Acting like a midwife using leading questions, one may get them to modify their position.

(3) Choose a topic to discuss that is not emotionally loaded, and about which one could have an agreement: e.g., Do you agree that large corporations should pay their fair share of taxes. How do you think we should manage this?

The problem is that so many of the people in the closed propaganda may temporarily be awakened, but the ecology is so strong and seductive, they are likely to be engulfed and overwhelmed by it.

Rational Approaches to Disinformation

- There are many techniques for educating information seekers in dealing with misinformation and disinformation, which I do not cover here:

- Information Literacy
http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/info.literacy.pdf

- Media Literacy
http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/media.literacy.pdf

- Digital Literacy

- Literacy about Ethical Violations in Political Rhetoric
http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/ethics.pdf

- Logical Fallacies
http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/logical.fallacies.pdf

Information Literacy

The American Library Association (ALA) characterizes information literacy as the: "set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information," including "competencies in formulating research questions and in their [students'] ability to use information as well as an understanding of ethical and legal issues surrounding information" and skills "in critical thinking" (Information literacy glossary, 2006).

With information literacy training, information seekers would:

1. know when they have a need for information
2. identify information needed to address a given problem or issue
3. find needed information and evaluating the information
4. organize the information
5. use the information effectively to address the problem or issue at hand. (adapted from Presidential committee on information literacy: Final report, 2006)

Media Literacy and Media Ethics

- Media literacy is: "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (Media literacy defined, 2010).

- It strives to promote Media Ethics which promotes a "capacity to contribute clarity and build trust around verified content" (Ireton & Posetti, p. 27). Its core principles are (Ireton & Posetti, pp. 27-28):

1. Accuracy: trying to get the fact right
2. Independence: having an independent voice, not acting on behalf of special interests and acknowledging any conflicts of interest
3. Fairness: sorting the evidence to provide a fair picture
4. Confidentiality: maintaining the trust and privacy of information sources
5. Humanity: the impact of journalism must be considered by not inappropriately maligning persons or groups
6. Accountability: must correct errors, and listen to opposing voices and resources
7. Transparency: describes the situation that occurs when journalists and newspapers openly communicate important information to their audiences

Digital Literacy and Digital Ethics

- Digital literacy is "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (Heitin, 2016).

- Digital literacy seems to be a cross of information literacy and media literacy, with an emphasis on its occurrence in digital technologies and environments (that do have some distinctive problems – e.g., false identities and spam attacks).

- It promotes digital ethics, which Daniel Richards asserts, "encompasses how users and participants in online environments interact with each other and the technologies and platforms used to engage."

- He adds, "An important part of maintaining a solid digital ethos is critically reflecting on your choices of online self-representation and whether or not these choices reflect your goals as a student and as a professional" (Richards, n.d.).

- Given a particular context, are one's choices of self-representation or for the representation of others ethical? The basic idea is that the ethical principles that we invoke in other environments should be invoked online and on digital media such as cell phones: e.g., do not spread rumors about others that you would not have done to yourself or do not i privately shared information publicly without permission.

Different Approaches to the Age of Disinformation

- The Age of Plato's Cave Dwellers
- The Age of Distraction (Heidegger)
- The Age of the Anti-Enlightenment
- The Age of Surveillance Capitalism
- The Age of Inflamed Grievances

For detail, see: Philosophical Musings on the Underbelly of the Age of Information," invited paper for special issue of Informatio (Instituto de Información, Faculdad de Información y Communicación, University of Uruguay), vol. 26, no. 1 (May 31, 2021) available at: https://informatio.fic.edu.uy/index.php/informatio/article/view/313

The future does not look bright for American democracy. The power and greed of Republicans, their harnessing the power of propaganda and their disdain of the Constitution and truth are likely to turn the United States into an autocracy within few years. The latest outrage was that Gov. DeSantis of Florida passed a law demanding that all students and faculty state their political viewpoints, so as to achieve political balance in Florida state schools and universities. It is an assault on freedom of speech. The alt-right know that education tends to convert conservatives into liberals.

Most of the references can be found here: http://personal.kent.edu/~tfroehli/workshop/Workshop.Bibliography.rev.pdf If any item is missing, please contact me and I will add it.