

Democracy in a Post-Truth Information Age

Thursday 18th to Friday 19th January 2018

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, two leading Western democracies, the UK and the US, held a referendum and an election that led to significant debate regarding the nature and quality of information available to the voting public. In particular, the Internet and social media were regarded as key emerging battlegrounds.

Internet search engines and social media technology companies have radically transformed how people search for and consume information and how information producers feed content to their consumers. For some, the Internet has democratized information publishing, making it possible for anyone to create content and share it with a global audience. This is seen as having levelled the playing field between citizens and institutions, and given a voice to previously marginalized individuals and communities. For others, though, internet technologies have also produced some less positive unintended consequences that are seen as leading to political and social polarisation; key among these are the increasing role of personalized search and "filter bubbles". And amidst this debate on the nature of how information is accessed and shared in an Internet society, there has been an increasing focus on the dissemination of so called "false" information. The latter phenomena have been so prominent that the Oxford Dictionary chose 'post-truth' as word of the year for 2016¹.

How should society respond to the challenge of a *post-truth* information age? Is there a danger of undermining democratic processes, promoting extremism, and destabilising society? Or are these claims simply reflecting the perspective of the established elite, which now faces new challenges as alternative viewpoints and information become more part of mainstream debate?

What is clear is that these societal challenges require examination from multiple perspectives to untangle and understand their constituent causes and effects and to gain insight into the future direction of democracy and wider society. To achieve this, a balanced and politically neutral assessment is needed of the rights and responsibilities of citizens, governments, businesses and the media, with both technological and social solutions examined.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

During and after the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership widespread claims have been made about significant deficiencies in the provision of reliable information upon which the public could make an informed

¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>



decision. On September 1st, 2016, Will Brett of the Electoral Reform Society posted an article *Doing Referendums Differently*,² which drew attention to: 'glaring democratic deficiencies'; he described how 'people felt they were ill-informed about the issues'; and that 'misleading [campaign] claims could be made with impunity'. Even prominent campaigners for a leave vote such as Dominic Cummings have suggested that the referendum could have been a "dumb idea"³.

On the other hand, it has been argued that the referendum result represents a triumph of democracy. According to this view, the ability for campaigners to reach and engage many different and diverse groups within society is seen as having allowed the "will of the people" to be expressed, giving the UK population a very significant level of direct influence over the country's future direction.

Analysis of claims around false information generally sees it as being divided into two types:

1. **misinformation**, which contains inaccurate or misleading information that is disseminated without awareness that it is untrue; and
2. **disinformation**, which contains false or misleading information that is deliberately disseminated to deceive a target audience.

For example, during and after the 2016 US election there has been continuous commentary online and in the media about misinformation, disinformation and the now ubiquitous buzzword 'fake news'. On November 18th, 2016, Claire Wardle of the Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), a US magazine and forum for journalists and media professionals, posted an article providing examples of the different types of misinformation and disinformation actively used during the 2016 election,⁴ which included mischievous hoaxes as well as elaborate imposter news sites branded to look like real news sites.

Sources of mis- or disinformation range from members of the public themselves all the way up to foreign powers seeking to influence democratic outcomes. For example, In January 2017 the US intelligence community officially concluded that the Russian government interfered with the 2016 US elections. In that month the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) issued a report entitled *Background to "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections"*,⁵ among the key judgements of which were the following statements:

- 'the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton'; and that

² <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/blog/doing-referendums-differently>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/brexit-dominic-cummings-vote-leave_uk_595b62bbe4b02734df33fbc0

⁴ http://www.cjr.org/tow_center/6_types_election_fake_news.php

⁵ https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

- 'a Russian messaging strategy [was developed] that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or “trolls.”'

Whatever side of the debate one looks from, it is clear that misinformation and disinformation pose a risk to any decision-making process, even if only at the level of its perceived validity. In the 2016 US election highly coordinated campaigns of pernicious disinformation demonstrated a disruption to the democratic process itself.

According to this analysis, the Internet is a double-edged sword when it comes to the functioning of effective democratic processes. It has democratised publishing and communications; it provides instant access to vast amounts of information and knowledge; it facilitates dialogue and collaboration between individuals who might not otherwise be able to interact with each other; and it has liberated dissenting voices in communities otherwise silenced by authoritarian censorship. At the same time, however, it has produced several significant problems, including:

1. the origin of information is increasingly opaque, blurring the boundary between professionally researched and validated information and partisan or untrustworthy sources, making it more and more difficult for individuals to judge the quality or perspective of the information they encounter;
2. web search engines and social media websites increasingly make decisions *without the knowledge or input of users themselves* about filtering and personalising the information each user sees, undermining objectivity and reinforcing personal biases at the expense of a shared “public sphere” in which all citizens can (at least theoretically) gain access to a common set of information resources that inform their decisions;
3. the ability of individuals to repost unauthenticated news stories rapidly leads to the “echo-chamber” effect, giving rise to the misleading impression that information encountered by citizens is “public” and shared, and is based on independently verified sources rather than representing a particular perspective;
4. autonomous internet personas, called *socialbots*, automatically generate messages that appear to come from humans, and these socialbots have been successfully exploited by propagandists to generate artificial support or opposition during election campaigns.

Given that a large and growing segment of the public now refer to the Internet as their primary or exclusive source of news and general knowledge, this presents potentially very significant problems.⁶ The Internet is not a curated medium: there is no in-built mechanism by which judgements can be made between “trustworthy” information sources as opposed to opinion-based sources, or sources whose chief purpose is in

⁶ <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/>

fact to actively misinform or mislead. The decentralised and unregulated nature of the Internet, which in many other respects is one of its core strengths, make it harder for the public to distinguish fact from opinion while making it easier for partisan interests to disseminate disinformation and propaganda.

Indeed, as we begin to map out the problem space of the post-truth information age, it becomes clear that fake news may only be the visible *tip-of-the-iceberg*, while the personalisation filters applied by search engines and social media websites occupy a much larger but still relatively unseen and unrecognized space.

These search engines and social media websites are designed to profile the interests and preferences of individuals, and then deliver content that is personalised for each user. While it can certainly be argued that this is to the benefit of users, who are thus able to focus on information relevant and useful to them amid the deluge of potential sources, it is also clear that moves towards personalisation have also brought significant benefits to those seeking to shape behaviour and even manipulate opinions.

For example, it is generally accepted that personalisation initially came to the fore when online retailers discovered that it increased sales - at least in part because it helped shoppers more easily and quickly find and buy products or services that were relevant to them. But as the phenomenon spread from the confines of online retail websites to become an inherent and ubiquitous design feature of web search engines and social media websites (both of which derive their income from online advertising), unintended consequences have also arisen. Not least, the public is now exposed to increasing amounts of filtered and biased information, which (particularly given they are not aware of filtering taking place) can reinforce pre-existing beliefs, limit exposure to alternative viewpoints, and lead people to wrongly assume that the information they are accessing is broader and more objective than it actually is.

Of course, the efforts of elites to control the information available to the public are an age-old phenomena. Theorists and academics from Marx and Gramsci to Habermas and Foucault have called attention to this process, whether through the 'softer' bonds of power as it is played out through societal structures and connections (for example), while countless studies have explored the more direct, overtly managed connections of partisan voices and propaganda disseminated through the mass media and information tools.

However, it seems that the invisible mechanisms of Internet personalisation raise the problem to new heights. Particularly because many (possibly most) people are unaware that the information they retrieve from the Internet has been pre-filtered based upon detailed personal profiles that online information providers have created about them, it can take on an insidious dimension.⁷ The public is generally aware that newspapers and

⁷ 'Acxiom alone has accumulated an average of 1,500 pieces of data on each person on its database – which includes 96 percent of Americans...' Pariser, E., (2011) 'The Filter Bubble', London, Penguin Books, p.7

broadcast media represent an editorial slant, or even that news sources may be subject to state propaganda or censorship. Where freedom of the media exists, people can choose to switch their preferred source of news or to sample a range of differing partisan views. Internet personalisation, however, operates ubiquitously, imperceptibly and without consent. Its influence is effectively subliminal: individuals have little awareness of and even less control over how their information sources are being filtered.

It is convincingly argued, for example, that personalisation of information sources encourages confirmation bias, the cognitive tendency to search for, interpret, prefer and recall information that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs, while disregarding contrary information or alternative beliefs. Author Eli Pariser describes this well in his 2011 book *The Filter Bubble*:

'Left to their own devices, personalisation filters serve up a kind of autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar... In the filter bubble, there's less room for the chance encounters that bring insight and learning... the collision of ideas from different disciplines and cultures'.⁸

In his farewell address to the nation on January 10th, 2017,⁹ President Barack Obama went further, describing the threat posed to democracy by insular societal and social media bubbles:

'For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighbourhoods or college campuses or places of worship or our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste... we become so secure in our bubbles that we accept only information, whether true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that's out there.'

President Obama's assessment reflects the significantly older views of theorists of liberal democracy like De Tocqueville or more recently Jurgen Habermas regarding the importance of access to objective and shared information in a well-functioning democracy. It also reminds us that in "civil society" or the "public sphere", it is vital for people to be aware of - if not actually open to - the views and opinions of people outside their own social groups. According to this analysis, it seems that whatever side of a political debate one is on, personalised filter bubbles, misinformation and disinformation are in danger of adversely impacting society at a deep cultural level. They propagate confusion and distrust, enkindle prejudice and intolerance, and ultimately promote social polarisation and political and religious extremism.

And in addition to the issues caused by filter-bubbles and cyber disinformation campaigns, there are increasing concerns regarding unregulated political advertising on the Internet. Paid political content and

⁸ *ibid.*, p.15

⁹ <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-obama-farewell-speech-transcript-20170110-story.html>

advertising on social media, especially micro-targeted messaging, was described by campaign managers as 'decisive'¹⁰ and 'a game changer'¹¹ affecting the results of both the 2016 US Presidential election and EU referendum. Unlike the print and broadcasting industries, political advertising on the Internet is completely unregulated.

THE FUTURE - WHAT ARE WE CONSULTING ON?

It seems inevitable that should things continue as they are, the deliberate dissemination of disinformation through cyber-propaganda tools like socialbots is likely to increase. The previously cited ODNI paper concluded with the warning: 'We assess Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes.' Likewise, exposure to filtered and uncurated information is on the increase. Web search engines and social media websites are gaining in popularity as the public migrate away from libraries¹² and traditional media sources.¹³

The consultation this paper is intended to support is based on the assumption that to come to a satisfactory solution to these problems, societal as well as technological solutions need to be considered. On December 13th 2016, Tony Greenham of The RSA posted an article *Why Fake News Doesn't Swing Elections*,¹⁴ in which he considers politically motivated reasoning, drawing on evidence from political psychology. Greenham describes how a person's membership in social groups can be so important to their identity that they will conform their 'assessments of all manner of information... to the position associated with [their] respective group.' Greenham argues strongly for the need for 'new tools that can heal [social divisions], from the more radical devolution of power to communities, to fostering stronger civil society movements, to developing community business leaders, to the use of new online deliberative tools.' Crucially, these are social, not just technological "tools."

In exploring and evaluating various potential technological and societal solutions, the views of citizens, governments, businesses and the media will be sought. Among the challenges to be addressed are: How can propaganda and disinformation be tackled while simultaneously avoiding

¹⁰ Gary Coby, Republican National Committee, speaking on BBC Panorama programme *What Facebook Knows About You*, first broadcast May 8th, 2017

¹¹ Gerry Gunster, Campaign Strategist, Leave.EU, speaking on BBC Panorama programme *What Facebook Knows About You*, first broadcast May 8th, 2017

¹² '34% of adults had used a public library service in the 12 months before being interviewed [in 2015]. This is a statistically significant decrease [14%] since data collection began in 2005/06...' *Changing patterns of library use*, Libraries Taskforce, UK Dept. For Culture, Media & Sport, May 10, 2016: <https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/2016/05/10/changing-patterns-of-library-use/>

¹³ 'digital ad spending grew another 20% in 2015 to about \$60 billion... But journalism organizations have not been the primary beneficiaries... 65% – is swallowed up by just five tech companies.' *State of the News Media*, Pew Research Centre, June 15, 2016: <http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/state-of-the-news-media-2016/>

¹⁴ *Why Fake News Doesn't Swing Elections*, Tony Greenham, The RSA, 13th December 2016: <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2016/12/why-fake-news-does-not-swing-elections>

censorship and preserving freedom of speech? How can citizens be empowered to distinguish fact from opinion while also respecting their freedom as consumers to choose to receive personalized information including biased information? How can Internet technology businesses balance the needs and interests of their non-fee-paying information consumers with those of their fee-paying advertisers. What lessons can be learned from print and broadcasting media sectors, where content is moderated by professional standards and government regulations? How can citizens and social, religious and political groups with vastly different viewpoints be drawn together in conversation?

The problem space is multifaceted, and participants for this consultation will be drawn from multiple disciplines and professions including: print, broadcast and online media; web and Internet technology and standards; web search engines and social media websites; electoral governance; defence and intelligence; libraries; science; education; as well as independent authors and consultants.

Between now and January we may wish to send you further relevant background material. The consultation will focus attention on developing, validating and prioritising viable solutions as well as identifying the organisations and individuals who might champion the solutions which need to be developed.