Combating Misinformation

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Quality, accurate information is important to any community.
Threats to accurate information have always existed, but inaccurate information spreads quickly online.

1. Misinformation
2. Disinformation
3. Biased information
4. Conspiracy theories
What I’ll be talking about today

1. Present Day Challenges
2. Local Misinformation Spread
3. Information Vulnerabilities
4. What can we do?
PRESENT DAY CHALLENGES
Understanding the Media Ecology

- Marked by variety
- Many ways for information (accurate and inaccurate) to reach a large audience.
- Many places for inaccurate information to spread
Sources of inaccurate information

- Foreign actors
- Trolls
- Political actors
- Media actors
- Everyday citizens

Anyone can also be an amplifier of inaccurate information.
Sockpuppetry

- **Sockpuppets**: Fake personas on the internet, often used to spread misinformation

Source: Maity et al. (2017). Detection of sockpuppets in social media. (Link)
Sockpuppetry & Bots

• **Sockpuppets**: Fake personas on the internet, often used to spread misinformation

• **Social Bot**: An automated piece of code that communicates online. These are often used to amplify misinformation.
Misinformation & Complexity

Complex topics are vulnerable to inaccuracy.

1. Economic information
2. Medical information
3. Scientific information
False information spreads quickly

On social media, false information can spread faster than true information (Vosoughi et al., 2018)

1. False information provides simple answers
2. False information is often sensational
3. False information encourage in-group/out-group attitudes
LOCAL DIS/MISINFORMATION
Dis/Misinformation in Texas

Texas is a common target for mis- and disinformation.

1. Population
2. Political significance
3. Media ecology
Russian trolls targeting Texas

Texas secession was a key theme in Russian disinformation campaign during 2016 elections, report says

The Russian-based Internet Research Agency used two social media accounts in particular – "Heart of Texas" on Facebook and @rebeltx on Instagram – to spread falsehoods and exert divisions during the 2016 elections, according to a new report.

BY TEO ARMUS    DEC. 17, 2018    4 PM CENTRAL
Russian trolls targeting Texas
Local Misinformation

Local misinformation can spread very easily online.

San Antonio man sentenced to federal prison for COVID licking hoax
Local Misinformation

Local misinformation can spread very easily online.

Even from presumably trustworthy sources.

Dr. Mary Bowden resigned from Houston Methodist after the hospital said she was spreading misinformation about COVID-19 on social media. Dr. Bowden was suspended last week. In a series of tweets, the hospital said she was spreading “dangerous misinformation (about COVID-19 on social media) which is not based in science.”
Spanish Misinformation

Our analysis also indicates that Italian and Spanish-speaking users may be at greater risk of misinformation exposure. Facebook has not yet issued warning labels on 68% of the Italian-language content and 70% of Spanish-language content we examined, compared to 29% of English-language content.
Texas Mis/Disinformation

1. Promote extreme and polarizing beliefs about important local issues
2. Exploits tribalism
3. Provides easy solutions to complex problems
4. Can come from local, national, and even foreign actors
INFORMATION VULNERABILITIES
A Vulnerable Media Ecology

Despite the abundance of ways to communicate, getting accurate, relevant information is increasingly difficult.

1. An abundance of information
2. Fewer people and resources to sift through it
Vulnerable Circumstances

1. News Deserts
2. Diminishing Local News
3. Crisis Situations
4. Online/Offline Coordination
Diminishing Local News

1. There are fewer resources to cover local news.
2. Local news outlets are bought out by national companies.
3. COVID-19 exacerbated local news closures.
4. People are consuming less local news, too.
Crisis Situations

Crisis situations are vulnerable to misinformation (e.g., COVID-19).
Data Voids

Michael Golebiewski of Microsoft coined the term “data void” in May 2018 to describe search engine queries that turn up little to no results, especially when the query is rather obscure, or not searched often.

• **Crises situations produce data voids.**
• It is **essential** to fill data voids with good information, even if that information is “we don’t know.”
COVID-19 vaccine

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about ongoing research for potential COVID-19 vaccine. For potential therapeutic drugs for COVID-19, see COVID-19 that may be repurposed for treating COVID-19, see COVID-19 drug repurposing research.

A COVID-19 vaccine is a hypothetical vaccine against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Although no vaccine has completed clinical trials, there are multiple attempts in progress to develop such a vaccine. In late February 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) said it did not expect a vaccine against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the causative virus, to become available in less than 18 months. The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) – which is organizing a US$2 billion worldwide fund for rapid investment and development of vaccine candidates – indicated in April that a vaccine may be available under emergency use authorization by the end of 2020.
Online/Offline Coordination

Online misinformation is often accompanied with offline action.
COMBATING MISINFORMATION
Combating Misinformation

Complex problems require multi-faceted solutions.

1. Media Literacy Programs
2. Providing quality information
3. Debunking incorrect information
Media Literacy

1. Support local journalistic endeavors

2. Libraries can provide essential media literacy programs

3. Encourage media literacy educational programs
Providing Quality Information

1. Website and resources
   Anticipate topics likely to invite misinformation (e.g., elections, education policy)

2. Social media engagement

3. Amplify quality information from local sources (citizens, journalists, specialists, etc.)
Non-English Resources

1. Promote non-English fact checking resources
2. Support the translation of resources that combat misinformation
3. Encourage social media companies to provide non-English resources, particularly around contentious political issues
4. Build relationships with local diaspora communities
Debunking incorrect information

1. Debunk information using the truth sandwich
2. Call out individuals who repeatedly share incorrect information
3. Report and flag content

Speaking of respect. If someone shares misinformation or something you don't believe, please be kind.
Misinformation: A Future

We will never “be rid” of false information.

But we can build resources, programs, and tools that diminish the effect of misinformation and provide quality information.
Combating Misinformation

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