Saving Freedom of Expression from Disinformation Through Diversification of Algorithms in Social Media

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Introduction
Since the election of President Donald Trump and confirmation of Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, the term, “Fake News” has conquered the American political arena, threatening the very fundamental principle of democracy known as freedom of speech and the democratic institutions protecting it in the United States and around the globe. This historic phenomenon known as disinformation has been revolutionized and proliferated with the rise of social media and digital news, dividing societies into two major camps fighting over the right balance between freedom of speech and protecting democratic institutions. On the one hand, there are groups who advocate for more laws and regulations that remove, limit, and penalize online platforms that are considered to spread deliberate misinformation. On the other hand, there are opponents who argue that any form of restrictions would infringe the rights of people to freedom of expression, which undermines the democratic process in free societies where press is expected to inform the public about important events impacting the society as well as holding those in power accountable for their words and actions. Indeed, Facebook’s re-affirmation of its freewheeling policy on political ads - despite escalating pressure ahead of the 2020 presidential elections - clearly demonstrates the complication of this shared struggle among powerful actors in the business, politics, and civil society.

Irrespective of their stance on the issue, both sides are missing the other part of this two-dimensional equation. While one party is ignoring the threat against democratic institutions to protect freedom of speech, the other is jeopardizing the right to freedom of expression to maintain the public trust in democratic institutions. Erasing one side of the equation will ultimately perish both in the long term. In order to defend these indispensable principles and concepts that have long guaranteed freedom in societies, there needs to be a solution that counters the threat of fake news with the same tools that it uses to undermine them. Those are technology, artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and analytics designed and led by human beings.
The Current Unsustainable and Self-Biting Approaches

There are a number of methods that social media giants in collaborations with civil society organizations and governments have used to strike a balance between freedom of speech and protecting democratic institutions.

- Many social media companies including Facebook and Twitter have formed their teams of experts who monitor contents and review accounts to prevent the spread of false news on their platforms. In order to remain neutral, they closely work with third-party fact-checkers to help identify fake accounts and false news. However, these fact-checkers are often certified through other nonpartisan / nonprofit organizations that are funded by the very same corporations implementing these recommendations. For instance, Facebook largely works with fact-checkers that are certified by the International Fact-Checking Network, which happens to be largely funded by the company through its Facebook Journalism Project.3

- There is another version of this approach that some lawmakers like the parliamentarians in Singapore have taken to nullify the disinformation campaigns in their countries. Last year, Singapore's parliament passed legislation that requires online media platforms to carry corrections and remove contents that the government considers to be false, with penalties ranging from heavy fines to serving up to 10 years in prison.4 While this move has outraged social media giants like Facebook and Google for residing too much power in the hands of the government, the truth of the matter is that they are upset because this self-claimed power was taken away from them. At the end of the day, these kinds of approaches to fight online disinformation and fake news - whether run by governments or nongovernmental organizations - are two sides of the same coin. The only difference is that the government takes an easy route to have full and direct control over the flow of information whilst technology giants seek to achieve the same objective in an indirect and more complex manner.

- There are also anti-disinformation campaigns launched by established media organizations to denounce fake news. The mainstream approach has been centered around creating “fact-checker” programs where journalists analyze and verify the correctness of news and statements made by elected officials and candidates. Whether it is Washington Post reporting on 16,241 lies that President Trump made in his first three years in office5 or it is CNN’s “facts first” initiative that closely monitors every statement in the impeachment inquiries and democratic debates, this approach only touches the issue on the surface. In fact, it easily backfires by attacks from influential individuals -- often vested with political power -- to undermine the legitimacy of the news organization in the eyes of the public. Trump’s constant attacks on media and journalists clearly display how the whole anti-fake news campaign has completely turned against the media itself.

- Last but not least, there has been recalibration and re-investment in “media literacy” to institutionalize the fight against disinformation in a more sustainable fashion. David Buckingham, professor of Education and Director of the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media at the University of London refers to this contested term as a particular body of knowledge and set
of skills that have been acquired through a process of targeted media education. Given the media literacy’s connection to both media and education, and its close association with the younger generation and powers of influence, the very same actors in politics, civil society and business have been heavily involved in this field. From partnering with universities and funding media centers around the world to passing laws that require their version of media literacy to be taught at public schools, they are heavily investing in media education from an early age to shape the thinking model of the population in ways that information is consumed in their benefits. While this might present this sustainable solution in countering disinformation, the reality of the situation will not change much, knowing that the actors behind this movement are very much the same. Indeed, this approach is more dangerous than previous ones because it aims to invent this neutral go-to authority that can tell the public who they can and cannot trust in a systematic manner.

Diversification of Information Through Reverse Engineering of Social Media Algorithms

In order to tackle this issue at its core, there needs to be an application designed that gathers and compresses information from various news sources about important global events and provides the users with a multidimensional and comprehensive view of the stories. Having content – whether fake or factually wrong -- censored and removed will not help people become informed about issues impacting them. In fact, the main obstacle here is the power of the partisan governments and social media giants that fund and indirectly control many of the renowned news media, which ultimately shapes the public opinion in their interests. However, the average citizen is usually unaware of the role of powerful interests behind media organizations such as tier funding, political associations, and reporting styles. In fact, the lack of knowledge about this information combined with a lack of openness to alternative views have created the proper environment for populist leaders to polarize and divide societies. For example, there is no need to be a media literate to recognize that two of America’s largest news organizations namely Fox News and CNN have stark differences in reporting, which seems to be largely aligned with the party lines than journalism standards. In addition, the social media giants have only fueled this polarization in societies as their marketing-based algorithm model of reference is coded in such a way that will never expose the user to accounts with different views. But instead, it recommends the very like-minded accounts that merely further solidifies one’s personal views while villainizing the others. Given the majority of the population get their news from social media these days, this AI model will only make people more narrow-minded and divided, allowing for fake news and disinformation to thrive even more.

What this application endeavors to achieve is to expose the users to a variety of news sources across the political spectrum that are often missed and ignored by digital citizens. Moreover, it hyperlinks news organizations to their unique pages with key information about them. The users would first select the news source of their choice but once they click on their first preferred option, it, unlike Facebook and Twitter, recommends a news organization with a totally different view to the chosen one. This new model of an algorithm will transform the daily news reading in such a way that digital citizens will no longer be confined to one or two preferred sources of news but they are exposed to other news sources that challenge their views and broaden their visions about the varying
interests behind the world of media. More importantly, it allows the citizens of different backgrounds to gain some insight into the reasoning of the others, allowing them to use their rights to freedom of speech for constructive and healthy discussions over issues in the society. In such an environment, the public’s overall vision and maturity will grow up to a level where open--minded and content--based discussions replace the polarized and tussle--like arguments in society.

It is noteworthy to mention that this application will be supported by a team of experts that includes journalists, historians, and political scientists at the backend to provide unbiased and neutral information about the content, as well as the news sources themselves. Their main task is to read between the lines of the eight most--read news media (chosen by the users based on the reversed algorithm of typical social media model) and highlight differences in their reporting, statistics, and facts for the users. This way, it is not the social media giants, governments, and corporate media that decides what to cover, censor and remove for the public. Instead, it is the people who will be given the freedom of choice to analyze and interpret the same story by looking at various sources of news and referring to the one--pager prepared by the team of experts.

In technical terms, this application will use aggregation technology to consolidate eight different news sources with diverse views into one easy viewing page. By clicking on each news source, the highlights of the reported news will appear in the form of bullet points. This reduces the time and effort needed for the users to read the full story (there will be a link to access the main article). It is important to note that the news aggregator will update information in real--time so that the users stay informed and up to date on the story. In short, this application will become a unique personal newspaper that will not only tell one version of the story but sheds light on different versions and aspects of the same story reported by other media outlets. Furthermore, this application, just like Wikipedia, will have the names of the news organizations, politicians, historic events, and important terms hyperlinked so that the users can simply click on them to instantly get key information about them. This will help the readers to gain a better understanding of the context in which the news is being reported. Also, the users will be provided with access to a one--pager prepared by the team of experts that highlights important differences in reporting, statistics, and facts by some of the most--viewed news media across the political spectrum. Consequently, this application automatically makes fake news irrelevant by making the general public, especially the younger generation, more informed and knowledgeable about alternative views, differences in reporting, and active actors behind media organizations.

The Old Concepts of Freedom Only Defendable by New Technology

According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” In the new era of social media, this concept has been under serious attack by disinformation and fake news. The old--school way of controlling information through partial and full censorship is unsustainable in protecting freedom of speech and the institutions protecting it. The only way forward is to empower people by broadening their visions and expanding their knowledge of the varying forms of journalism and powerful interests behind the influential media. With billions of people having access to the internet, the enlightening process could be fast--tracked through a few clicks and taps on diversified sources of information on the electronic devices.
Footnotes


References


