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Impact of Technology on the Spread of Misinformation

The purpose of this research paper is to discuss the effect that technology has had on the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories throughout the years. It is important to understand the impact that technology has on the spread of misinformation because of its ability to put the public's health at risk and incite violence. Understanding the role of technology in the spread of harmful misinformation is the first step to begin making considerations to best combat misinformation. Education in information literacy as well as information technology systems that can detect misinformation will be necessary as we continue to spend more and more time online. It is important that we become aware of the kinds of misinformation that is spread online and why we are influenced by it. How does the influence of misinformation affect the thoughts and behaviors of readers? The objectives of this research is to better understand the kinds of misinformation that are popular on social media and how this misinformation affects the behavior of readers.

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories are a major factor in the spread of misinformation on the internet. A conspiracy theory is defined as a belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for a circumstance or event. Conspiracy theories can range from something as seemingly silly as Flat Earth to something as potentially dangerous as Save the Children. A conspiracy theory group that has grown in popularity in the recent years is known as QAnon.

Flat Earth consists of a group of individuals who believe that the Earth is flat, as opposed to being round. While the Flat Earth conspiracy theory may sound silly and relatively harmless, it still contributes to the spread of misinformation that creates a distrust between the people and their government agencies. Save the Children is a QAnon far-right conspiracy theory that is prevalent among supporters of Donald Trump and the Republican Party. Theorists believe that a satanic, deep-state paedophile cabal is trafficking children with involvement of famous celebrities and liberals/Democrats. Donald Trump is held to be the savior in this conspiracy theory that will save the children from the democrats. These dangerous beliefs held by the QAnon supporters, as well as claims of election fraud by Republicans, led to the violent riot in the U.S. Capitol on January 6th.

Public Health

There has always been a lot of misinformation regarding vaccination throughout history, however, this has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. QAnon has exploded in popularity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and followers of the group believe a lot of misinformation regarding the effectiveness of masks, the origin of COVID-19, and the development of vaccines.

Misinformation around the usage of masks in public spaces largely stems from misunderstanding the mask's purpose. The mask, in tandem with social distancing, is intended to prevent those already carrying the COVID-19 virus from spreading it to those around them. Asymptomatic carriers may not be aware that they are infected, so it is encouraged that everyone wear a mask when they are out in public. Some theorists believe that the virus was man made

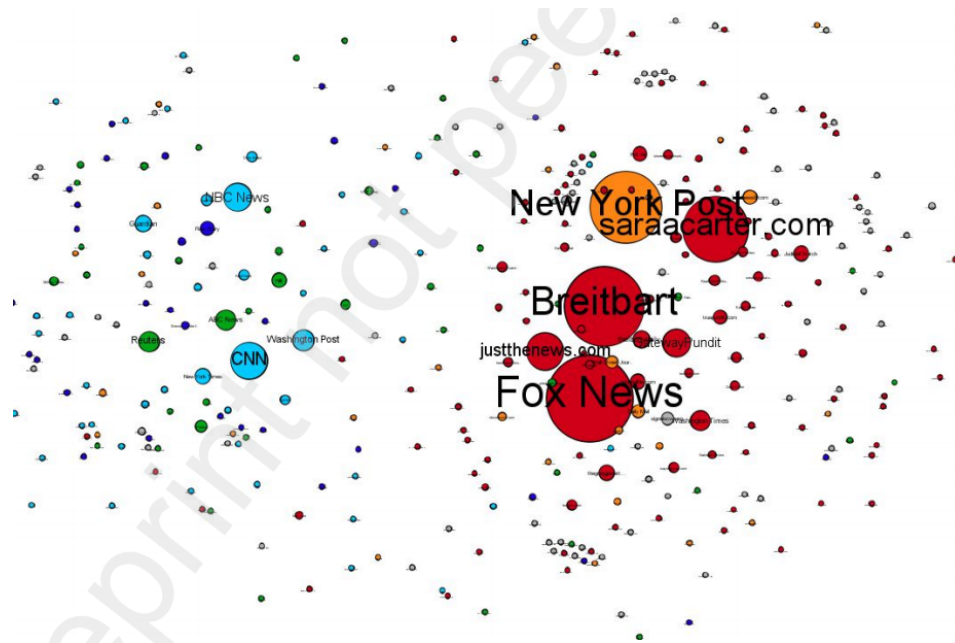
from a laboratory in Wuhan, China and others have concerns about the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine due to its quick development time compared to other vaccines. There is no evidence that supports the idea that COVID-19 came from a laboratory and researchers believe it originated naturally from animals. The COVID-19 vaccine was developed quickly as technology has become more advanced with more experts, compared to previous vaccination development efforts.

Elections

Misinformation is often spread during election years, but the 2020 election saw many claims of voter manipulation and voter fraud with an increase in mail-in ballots due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Low voter confidence and belief of widespread voter fraud in American presidential elections have been rising since the 2016 presidential election. This was exacerbated by the disinformation campaign waged by president Donald Trump and the RNC against the widespread usage of mail-in ballots during the 2020 election due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Benkler, 2020). Academic investigations into claims of voter fraud have found that occurrences of voter fraud are rare and are extremely unlikely to determine the outcome of a national election. Benkler does not believe that fact-checking on social media is the solution to combating elite-driven disinformation campaigns, but instead more accountability for professional media regarding how they deliver this kind of information to the masses. Election fraud stories written by professional right-wing media outlets were by far more likely to spread on social media websites like Twitter.

Figure 1 (Benkler, 2020)

The figure to the right displays the amount of voter fraud stories shared on Twitter. Node size indicates the amount of unique accounts that shared the stories.



Social Media and Fact Checking

As technology has become more widely used throughout the years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, fact checking websites and social media posts has become more important than ever. Social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have begun including factual information on posts about important issues that are prone to misinformation such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

YouTube provides context and factual information regarding topics that are prone to conspiracy theories and misinformation such as Flat Earth, Pizzagate, Sandy Hook, and COVID-19. Facebook has taken steps to crack down on misinformation groups on their platform and Twitter has been consistently flagging tweets regarding the 2020 presidential election as well as COVID-19 as potentially misleading or disputed, eventually leading to the suspension of

President Trump's Twitter account which repeatedly violated Twitter's rules regarding misinformation.

Conclusion

The most effective way to stop the spread of misinformation is to educate the public about information literacy and where to find credible sources of information. In an increasingly digital world, it is important that we are educated on information literacy in order to make informed decisions. Many people take the unverified information that they read on social media about important topics to be factual. It is important to note whether information is current and reliable from a source with credentials and affiliations. Information that is affiliated with a national government agency or university is likely to be credible, unlike unverified information that can be found throughout the web.

Misinformation affects the thoughts and behavior of readers in regards to how they think about many government-related issues. Misinformation creates a general distrust of governments among the people, which can cause a serious problem for the safety of political leaders and the public health of the country. Many social media sites are hubs for the spread of misinformation online and more needs to be done in order to ensure that information about sensitive topics are factually accurate. Many websites have begun implementing good measures to link to reliable sources of information on content that is related to sensitive topics. Overall, an increase of information literacy among internet users will be largely beneficial, so that people will be able to find credible sources of information on important topics.

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