COMM 490

Research Paper

Ethical Implications for Communicators in the Age of Fake News

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Abstract

Misinformation and disinformation are not new concepts. However, modern digital media (specifically social media) allow misinformation and disinformation to spread at prodigious speeds. Disinformation as disseminated across social media is often called "fake news," a term that rose to prominence during the 2016 US presidential election—a firestorm of mis- and disinformation. Fake news represents a significant threat to credible communicators. The agents creating and disseminating fake news are capable, sophisticated, and agile; communications professionals that attempt to navigate the current fake news environment using traditional practices and tools will quickly find that they cannot keep up. Nevertheless, communications practitioners have an imperative to understand how the current fake news environment affects their own work, and how their own work is perceived within the context of fake news. There are three key considerations for ethical communicators when navigating the waters of fake news: 1. Do not publish any information from any source that you do not know and trust completely, and be forthcoming about your sources. 2. Continuously seek up-to-date information on fake news, who is creating it, where it comes from, and the best practices on addressing it. 3. Adopt an outcome-focused ethical code when it comes to dealing with issues pertaining to fake news.

Fake News, and How It Spreads

"Fake news," as it pertains to mis- and disinformation, refers to intentionally-falsified information that presents itself as journalism (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news comes in many varieties, and comes from many different sources. Of most concern is the variety of fake news that seeks to do intentional harm. A large subset of the fake news ecosystem is politically-motivated, most famously the widespread disinformation campaigns observed during the United States' 2016 presidential elections. Fake news of this variety seeks to destabilize the democratic process in target countries. A well-informed voting populace is foundational to a functioning democracy; purveyors of this brand of fake news seek to influence democratic outcomes by spreading false information (Landon-Murray, Mujkic, & Nussbaum, 2019).

Though such campaigns are indeed harmful and a cause for international concern, fake news comes in subtler and less sinister varieties. There is a spectrum of mis- and disinformation (Wardle, 2017). At one end we have information that is false, but meant to do no harm. Satire or parody fall within this category. Moving along the spectrum, there is also a variety of fake news that offers genuine information, but presented in a misleading context. For example, a factual news story may be presented with a misleading headline meant to entice the reader to click through to the article. This is not necessarily sinister; many online media outlets use such tactics because they are effective at generating click-throughs and therefore increasing revenue (Reilly, 2018). Other actors may simply be misleading people as what they perceive to be a harmless joke (Wardle, 2017). In other cases, false information may stem from an honest mistake.

At the more malevolent end of the spectrum is information that is intentionally manipulated and fabricated. This is the variety of disinformation that "fake news" most specifically refers to. Much of the focus on fake news deals with the spread of false information

to influence democratic elections, but some fake news creators simply did it for the money (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). An online story that goes viral and reaches millions of viewers can translate into significant advertising income for the story's creator.

Indeed, one of the most problematic facets of fake news is the speed at which it spreads. Fake news primarily spreads via social media, a platform to which it is well-suited (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Users of social media share content with one another for many reasons, but key among them is entertainment value. Whether shared information is true or false is often a secondary concern (Reilly, 2018). Social media platforms like Facebook use algorithms to determine what users see. These algorithms are trained to show users more of what they like, which may include a continual serving of misinformation if that user had shown an affinity for similar content in the past. The result is that social media users see a steady stream of content that reinforces their existing biases, whether or not that information is true (Borel, 2017).

This algorithm-powered approach to content curation has left most internet users stuck in an ecosystem that allows fake news to flourish. Facebook reports nearly 1.5 billion daily active users around the globe (Castillo, 2018). Facebook also refers more users to known fake news websites than any other referrer (Wong, 2016). Establishment media sources now rely on the same online advertising revenue models that fake news sites use as their source of funding, and the two sources are effectively competing for those clicks. Since content curation algorithms favour the user's preference, they are likely to show many users entertaining fake news instead of uninteresting factual news. Further, credible news outlets have the burden of research, reporting, and fact-checking. Without this critical but resource-intensive hurdle, fake news sites can push higher volumes of content with significantly less overhead (Reilly, 2018).

Working within this ecosystem presents a number of ethical challenges for communicators. Journalists, public relations practitioners, advertisers, and other communications professionals all share this space with fake news creators, and in many ways are at a decided disadvantage. With that in mind, it is possible to combat and overcome mis- and disinformation in an ethical manner.

The Ethical Approach to Communicating in the Fake News Era

Of course, it goes almost without saying that a commitment to truth-telling is fundamental to many communication professions, and not just journalism (Day, 2006). However, there is more to truthful communication than avoiding lies. Within the fake news ecosystem, it becomes imperative not just to tell the truth, but to demonstrate how you arrived at that truth (Bjola, 2018). This is most easily achieved by rigorous documentation and attribution of sources. For academics or journalists, documenting and naming sources may not seem like a revolutionary idea, but the current environment commands such discipline from all communications practitioners.

This starts with content creators, whether they be journalists, marketers, or otherwise. Anyone who publishes information online must be aware that said information may wind up being served by content algorithms. Anyone who stumbles upon a piece of online communication in any context should be able to see not just who wrote that piece of content, but where they did their research. Most social media users don't care, and won't bother to vet the information they read—indeed, that is the problem at the root of fake news. However, anyone who does want to discover the source of information should have no barriers to doing so.

This leads into the expectations for communications professionals who deal with content *aggregation* rather than creation. Many websites (news outlets included) get a great deal of their online content by repackaging other online content that already existed. Such outlets should avoid ever aggregating content from unclear sources, and have an imperative to do their own research on where the content came from before they share or repackage it. Presently, this step is often overlooked (or simply ignored). Proper vetting of sources does take time, and most online outlets simply don't have it. They need to publish as much content as possible to generate as many clicks as possible, so resource-heavy research just isn't cost effective (Borel, 2017). If the original content creators do a better job at stating their sources, anyone sharing that content later can judge the accuracy of that content more readily.

Documenting sources is an important part of the solution, but documentation alone does not make for ethical online communication. It's crucial that communicators also thoroughly scrutinize their sources (Jahng, Hyunmin, & Annisa, 2020). No matter how convincing fake news may be (and it can indeed be convincing), ignorance must never be an excuse for reproducing mis- or disinformation. Part of the system that allows fake news to spread is though widespread social media sharing and content aggregation. If a communications professional publishes false information (even accidentally), other outlets may see and re-publish that information believing it to be true. Even if the original publisher issues a correction, it's too late; that false bit of information is no longer within their control. Thus, anyone publishing any manner of content online should treat publication as an absolute end. There is no real opportunity for redaction or correction once content goes live.

The extra scrutinization of sources is not limited to dubious sources, either. It's important to exercise vigilance when it comes to trustworthy sources as well. To reiterate, fake news is not

always intentional or sinister; plenty of mis- and disinformation is published purely by accident. While thorough research helps catch factual errors, communicators must be careful about publishing misleading information, even when it comes from an authoritative source. For example, we would typically consider elected politicians to be trustworthy sources, and most journalists would not hesitate to publish direct quotes from an elected official. However, when those politicians intentionally omit information from their statements, or otherwise attempt to distort the truth, it becomes unethical to blindly reproduce those quotes in the fake news ecosystem (Borden & Tew, 2007). Instead, a communicator tasked with reporting information given to them by a politician, business leader, or any other nominally-authoritative source should avoid reproducing misleading or incomplete information without also including clarification from alternate sources.

Publishing misinformation from an elected official, even when presented as direct quotes, legitimizes it. A social media user who sees the published quote alone may not know that it is false or misleading. Many journalists publish quotes without comment or correction, which they see as being impartial. However, knowingly publishing quotes that contain misinformation and letting the reader decide how to interpret them only helps fake news continue to spread (Borel, 2017). The best solution is to avoid publishing any mis- or disinformation, but where that is not possible it is crucial to provide clarification alongside the false information (Grech, 2017). Communicators have a duty to ensure that anything they publish is thoroughly fact-checked and that they aren't forcing readers to do their own research to identify false information.

Proper attribution and scrutinization of sources are foundational in the battle against fake news, but it alone won't be enough. The creators of fake news are not bound by ethical codes or bureaucracy, nor a desire to appear professional or even respectable. This allows fake news

purveyors a great deal of flexibility, and they are quick to evolve in the face of hardship (Borel, 2017). Accordingly, any communicator operating on the internet should take it upon themselves to stay abreast of the tactics being used by those who disseminate mis- and disinformation, as well as the current best practices for combating misinformation (Jahng, Hyunmin, & Annisa, 2020).

First and foremost, any professional communicator should be well-informed about the mechanisms by which fake news propagates. Modern internet users get a significant portion of their news and entertainment from social media (Landon-Murray, Mujkic, & Nussbaum, 2019). Consequently, it is likely impractical for a modern communications practitioner to avoid using social media, even if it is the primary mechanism by which fake news spreads. Instead of avoiding social media, one should take the time to understand how the different platforms' algorithms work and how information gets shared between users. It is irresponsible to post content on an online platform without understanding how that platform operates (Jahng, Hyunmin, & Annisa, 2020). Certainly, fake news purveyors are keenly aware of how to make effective use of the different social media platforms.

Fake news relies on both technical and psychological mechanisms to spread effectively, and a modern communications professional should be well-informed about the psychological mechanisms as well. Social media users tend to share bad information more readily than good information (Landon-Murray, Mujkic, & Nussbaum, 2019). Once dubious information is published, it begins a snowball effect that sees it shared over wider and wider networks. There are at least two significant reasons for this. The first is the phenomenon of users finding it less unethical to share misinformation after they've encountered it multiple times, even when they are fully aware the information is false (Effron & Raj, 2020). The second is that users tend to trust

information that comes through someone they know, such as a Facebook friend (Wardle, 2017).

Anyone dealing with fake news would do well to keep these factors in mind. One implication is

that it becomes dubious to republish fake news items even for the sake of debunking them. If

every exposure to misinformation reduces users' misgivings about sharing it, it would be prudent

to avoid sharing misinformation in any and all forms. Of course, to simply ignore misinformation

is not always possible, as in the earlier example of publishing quotes from an authority that

contain false information. When working with mis- and disinformation, it's important to weigh

the value of debunking false information against the potential harm done by amplifying that

information (even while debunking it). To make such judgment calls effectively, a communicator

needs to be well-informed about the fake news ecosystem and the best practices of the time, both

of which are in a constant state of flux.

Ultimately, working as a communicator in the fake news era comes down to those

judgment calls. Fake news and the systems that enable it evolve so quickly that any attempt to set

an absolute code of rules quickly falters. Instead, modern communicators would do best to adopt

a teleological approach when dealing with issues of misinformation. When in an ethical

quandary relating to fake news, communications practitioners should choose the course of action

that leads to the best outcome for communicators, media consumers, and society at large.

Sometimes that will mean publishing misinformation (though always alongside proper fact-

checking), and other times that will mean ignoring misinformation. There is simply no way to set

rules in stone when it comes to an adversary as flexible as the fake news system.

Of course, this is easier said than done. In many situations, it will be difficult (if not

impossible) to arrive at a confident prediction that's necessary to make a decision from the

teleological perspective (Day, 2006). It is for that reason that it's so important for communicators

to be as informed as possible about the media ecosystems in which they operate. For the internet and the various social media platforms are indeed ecosystems, and a communications professional should see themselves as a part of that ecosystem (Tilley, 2011). Once one sees themself as part of an ecosystem rather than in combat with it, they can take action to influence the system.

That is where consequentialist ethics become a clear path forward. While individual decisions may lead to unpredictable results, communications practitioners should adopt a big-picture mindset, and make decisions based on what would lead to the best changes to the ecosystem at large. The fast-moving, untamed nature of the internet and social media is exactly what allows fake news to thrive, but it also represents an opportunity for communications professionals to seize the reins and start moving the ecosystem in a positive direction (Tilley, 2011). Teleological ethics are challenging in this space when one only looks at a small, case-by-case picture, due to the unpredictable and fast-moving nature of the ecosystem. Thus, it's crucial that communications practitioners not only adopt a consequence-based approach, but also take the time to understand their ecosystem as a whole—and their place within it.

Conclusion

Fake news is a very serious threat to professional communications, but it is not an insurmountable one. A calculated approach by all communications practitioners could stem the tide, but each and every individual is responsible for doing the work. The efforts of one will have little effect on such a large and complex ecosystem, but the combined efforts of thousands pulling in the same direction is a completely different story. That is what leads to real change.

Rigorous vetting of sources and open sharing of those sources is foundational to combatting fake news. Mis- and disinformation thrive in systems where original sources are often unclear. The next step is to adopt the ecosystem view of the internet, of social media, and of fake news. With this big-picture view in mind, and a commitment to understanding as much about the ecosystem as possible, professional communicators can shift the balance away from fake news. Ethical decision making is hard in such a complex environment, particularly the consequence-based approach recommended here, but trying to build and conform to rules simply doesn't work when the opponent is as flexible and unconcerned with morality as the fake news machine. Instead, focusing on decisions that lead to the best outcomes for the professional communications practice and internet users as a whole is the best option. Over time, a concerted effort by focused and informed professionals can shape the ecosystem into one that buries false information and amplifies the truth—inverting the way the system functions now.

For such an approach to be effective, there are many avenues of exploration yet to go down. For one, there is the possibility of using disinformation against itself. What would be the ethical implications of intentionally using misinformation to combat other information? If it were possible, would it be ethically sound to attempt to bury harmful misinformation under a pile of less-harmful misinformation? Coordinated misinformation campaigns such as those seen during the 2016 US presidential elections have incredible potential to cause harm. If some of that harm could be mitigated through strategic counter-misinformation, would the potential good outdo the harm of further muddying the waters with false facts?

While we understand many of the mechanisms by which fake news spreads, we simply do not know enough at this time. Hence, the suggestion that professional communicators should constantly seek new and better information on the subject. Fake news moves fast, and

communications practitioners simply need to learn how to move faster. Through rigorous

information sourcing and attribution, a ceaseless commitment to learning and understanding the

information/misinformation ecosystem, and a flexible consequence-based ethical approach,

modern communicators can turn the tide against fake news and restore the public's faith in

traditional media outlets.

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