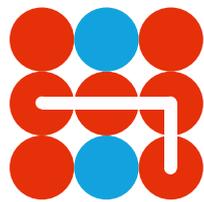Strategic Analysis February 2018

Beyond Fake News: Content confusion and understanding the dynamics of the contemporary media environment

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Hybrid CoE

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'We are in the phase that has always followed the implementation of a new media technology. It is the phase of disillusionment, the phase where the utopian promise of the technology turns sour; the recognition that technology itself does not bring equality, access to information and civil discourse to humankind', writes Katja Valaskivi, Research Director, Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Tampere, Finland.

Throughout last year, social media circulated the mea culpa of famous Silicon Valley technology gurus and angel investors who admitted that they were distraught and disappointed about their own naivety in believing that the internet would be the technology to bring peace and democracy to the world. We have read of mobile and social media developers who don't allow their children to use the technology they helped to craft since they have now become convinced that these devices and platforms are harmful to an individual's psyche and our social structure.

It seems that contemporary tech developers regret having contributed to the current state of affairs.

This does not come as much of a surprise, as every day brings new information on the harmful ways in which our media environment disrupts social structures, causes addiction and is consciously misused and manipulated for political aims, self-interest and even hostile influences. The contemporary media environment has been seen as contributing to the growing global mistrust, even to what are now called "hybrid threats".

From a historical perspective, we are in the phase that has always followed the implementation of a new media technology. It is the phase of disillusionment, the phase where the utopian promise of the technology turns sour; the

recognition that technology itself does not bring equality, access to information and civil discourse to humankind.

In this phase, we begin to see not only the positive unintended consequences, but also the collateral damage caused by technology and its implementation. Such a phase has followed all great media inventions. Perhaps the most striking reminder of this was the Nazi leader Paul Joseph Goebbels' acknowledgement as early as 1933 that: "It would not have been possible for us to take power or to use it in the ways we have without the radio".

The good news is that the current phase of disillusionment finally provides an opportunity for exploring our contemporary media environment from a new, more realistic perspective. **What we need to do now is to understand the dynamics through which the new technology is disrupting old structures**.

to an audience that was nationwide at its maximum reach. Looked at another way, these organizations contributed to the collective imagining of nations, smaller cultural entities and localities. Although the change in the media environment had already begun before the expansion of the internet, the tipping point has been the development of social media, particularly Facebook, during the last ten years.

There are (at least) five dynamics created by the internet and social media that we should be aware of: Firstly, the dispersal of the relationship between production, consumption and circulation; secondly, the condition of content confusion; thirdly, the increased reach of content beyond localities, national borders and cultural contexts; fourthly, altered media business models and revenue logics; and finally, an economic structure that is based on data, personal information and surveillance.

Although the change in the media environment had already begun before the expansion of the internet, the tipping point has been the development of social media, particularly Facebook, during the last ten years.

Not that long ago, there was a clear consensus on what 'the media' referred to. In simplified terms, it meant those organizations and companies that through professionalized practices and processes provided current information and entertainment on technology-specific platforms (newspapers, television, radio), usually

The first two dimensions, the changed relationship between production, consumption and circulation, and the condition of content confusion are integrally intertwined. **In our contemporary media environment, the pre-internet-era media conventions about content and contexts no longer apply.** Genre and context used

to provide a good indication of how to interpret media texts. Television news looked different from commercials and soap operas, and the channels producing them were limited in number.

ship to reliability no longer apply. **Unfortunately, this confusion is only intensified, not clarified with the use of the terms 'fake news' and 'fake media'.** Research indicates that not only are these concepts used politi-

Now what looks like a piece of news can still be news, but it can also be an advertisement, propaganda, manipulation, PR or simply a lie. All of these circulate on the same platforms. This is what Mara Einstein calls content confusion.

It is a condition whereby the relationship between the content producer and its audience/user has been altered, and the production context and motivation are unknown to the user, Who is often also the distributor, recommender, and commenter on the content on different social media platforms. **Sharing, commenting and liking often happen without knowing the original production context and based on recommendations by friends in the social networks, who might also be be recommending without any knowledge of the original purpose of the content.** Most of the institutions we previously termed "the media" are still there. They still play a significant role in content production, circulation and amplifying messages in the media environment, but no longer control access to the public sphere.

In other words, the conventions and shared understandings that we used to have about the forms and producers of text and their relation-

cally to undermine the status of journalistic media institutions, but they also refer to different things in different contexts. For some, fake news is just lies that are fabricated to look like pieces of news. This is probably the only remotely accurate usage of the term. For the most part, it can refer to anything from disinformation to misinformation, propaganda, manipulation, but also something that can be construed as a conflicting political viewpoint. According to the growing number of studies, for ordinary media users fake news is simply bad journalism. All in all, not a helpful concept.

The third dimension, **the transnational reach of media content and messages has many consequences, including increased possibilities for manipulation and interference in communication towards citizens of other nations.** Well-known and much-discussed examples include social media content, manipulation and targeting during the US

presidential election, and the UK Brexit vote. It is not, however, just the reach of social media that makes this type of manipulation not only possible but also financially lucrative. This ties in with the fourth and fifth dimension: business and revenue logics and surveillance. The technology giants ruling the internet use algorithms that are designed to learn to understand what users like and to provide them with matching content. The data produced by social media users is utilized in automatically profiling and targeting them with content that they supposedly desire.

recently been called surveillance capitalism. What was optimistically called the "new economy" has disrupted and corrupted the earlier revenue-generating models of established journalistic media institutions that relied either on subscription fees or advertising or both for their revenue. Now most of the advertising revenue goes to the global technology giants, which deny that they are actually media companies in the social sense, influencing how people perceive themselves, each other and societies.

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In addition, the platforms utilize human socio-psychological features to keep users hooked. This is how attention becomes revenue for the platforms: Content providers that attract audiences receive money with clicks. This very mechanism allowed a group of Macedonian children to earn money with fabricated stories that looked like pieces of news: The revenue logics of the platforms have no morals, but rely on the logic of a million flies. If it attracts, it is good even if it reeks.

The revenue logic of social media is based on the accumulated data of its users: **Monetizing the personal information of hundreds of millions of people, creating what has**

In order to understand the changes and instability that we are witnessing in our contemporary global political environment, we need to pay attention to these basic dynamics of the communication environment. **These developments are the result of the process whereby technology development takes place based on market and commercial principles without consideration of possible societal consequences.** The potential malevolent usage of new inventions is rarely imagined by the enthusiastic tech developers (or their investors) eager to change the world, become famous and cash in on their work, rather than anticipate the possible damage it might cause.

Throughout the history of the internet, stories about its possible side effects have emerged. Now that some tech developers have themselves realized the shortcomings, the issue has penetrated the public consciousness. Ideas and measures for resolving the issue range from regulation and further surveillance to better and less disruptive technologies, such as platforms and apps. We can only hope that before any more decisions are taken, thorough research will be undertaken and due consideration will be given to the pros and cons of the measures. If not, the pendulum will swing in the other direction, inflicting damage on the freedom of speech and privacy of citizens, as well as the stability of society.

speech has duly declined. The aim to reduce the circulation of lies, manipulation and hate speech is also behind Facebook's recent decision to change its algorithm to reduce media material in user feeds. The decision has been criticized by specialists and legacy media representatives, as it reduces the circulation of content produced by professional media organizations. The fact is, however, that we do not yet know what consequences these recent measures are going to have. Nonetheless, Facebook's measures prove that **regulation on the part of governments has prompted social media companies to take some responsibility for their actions, showing that government decisions matter.**

The way in which our communication environment is structured has consequences for democracy, the stability of society, the wellbeing of citizens – and peace.

Recently we have seen good research of the social consequences of the internet and social media, and some test cases in regulating the social media. Famously, as of 2018 Germany has introduced a law that requires social media companies to remove hate speech without delay from platxforms. As algorithms do not recognize satire or parody this has resulted, for example, in a parody magazine's Twitter account being shut down. Some reports say, however, that the volume of hate

The way in which our communication environment is structured has consequences for democracy, the stability of society, the wellbeing of citizens – and peace. As recent tech projects such as the Center for Humane Technology, or research initiatives such as the Data & Society Institute show, technology can also support societal perspectives rather than turn people into addicts in order to build revenue. It is not necessary for communication to be managed and governed by global, corporate giants.

Alternative ways of communication through the internet can and should be developed. In order to resolve issues of content confusion, there is a need to strengthen research and technologies focused on creating trust in the media environment. In the meantime, we can choose to respond judiciously to acts of aggression and manipulation that occur through our media technologies.

Author

Dr **Katja Valaskivi** is Research Director of Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication, and the Vice Dean of the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her main interest is the impact of media on society and her current research projects include research on information disorder and content confusion, media and terrorism, as well as the expansion of the promotional mode of communication. Her forthcoming book, Hybrid Media Events. The Charlie Hebdo Attacks and Global Circulation of Terrorist Violence (jointly written with Johanna Sumiala, Minttu Tikka and Jukka Huhtamäki) will be published by Emerald in May 2018. http://books.emeraldinsight.com/page/detail/Hybrid-Media-Events/?k=9781787148529

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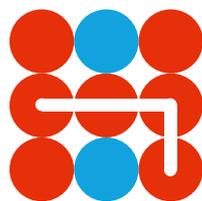
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