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IN THIS ISSUE

LIVING WITH LIES

Hemisphere

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear *Hemisphere* readers:

This issue addresses one of the most important issues on the agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean: the impact of post-truth on societies and political systems. The use of the media as a propaganda platform and tool for disinformation is no novelty, but the availability of new, powerful technologies, coupled with the profound sociological and economic transformations the world has experienced following the Cold War, have exacerbated this trend. Today, in a context of globalization and transformation driven by new knowledge, the use of misleading information or outright lies to manipulate the public has become a major threat to democratic systems and the rule of law.

The contributors to this issue caution us about the perils of post-truth to democracy in general, and democratic governance in particular. In their opinion, the current context is facilitating the use of social networks to spread lies and half-truths without restraint or accountability. A combination of factors, including massive, real-time distribution, popular mistrust of political institutions and leaders, and persuasive images taken out of context has turned false information into a lethal weapon against one of the most important tenets of democratic society: the presumption of innocence.

The biggest challenge of this phenomenon, of course, is how to neutralize it. In practice, such campaigns are technically difficult to grasp, often originating in anonymous "pirate" outposts in Russia, Central Asia or China, or underground virtual sweat shops in Mexico, where hackers and trolls operate with impunity. While some progress has been made toward enacting legislation to punish the perpetrators, the world is far from finding multilateral legal mechanisms to do so. As several of our contributors note, too much State intervention is not the answer. Autocratic and dictatorial governments have been quick to eradicate social media they find objectionable, cracking down on the right to protest and dissent. Such attacks on personal freedoms are just as pernicious as the misinformation circulating maliciously on the web.

Public education is the most viable and effective way to address this dilemma, but it will entail a major effort by public institutions, families and civil society, as well as the sustained participation of the private sector, particularly tech companies. These companies share responsibility for creating barriers and controls to encourage self-restraint and personal responsibility on the part of their consumers.

On behalf of the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center, I would like to thank our distinguished authors and, especially, Guest Editor Ricardo Trotti, for their exceptional contributions to this issue.

Luis Guillermo Solís
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FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

Disinformation and misinformation have permeated all areas of our society. We live in a new reality where, for some, alternate facts have become the new truths.

The digital ecosystem has generated new spaces that empower users to create, disseminate and share information, but at the same time, the abuse and misuse of communication technologies have magnified the spread of hate speech, bullying and smear tactics, exacerbating the polarization of public debate.

At the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), a non-profit organization representing major media organizations in North America, South America and the Caribbean, it is not only our job to defend press freedoms and shine a light on injustice and human rights violations, but also to defend truth and factual news.

As part of this mission, I am honored to act as guest editor of this special issue of Hemisphere, which examines dis/misinformation and media literacy in the Americas. Truthful information has never been as important as it is today, in the midst of a pandemic, when everyone deserves to have access to information that is fact-based and verifiable.

The other contributors and I hope that the articles in this issue bring greater clarity and understanding about the importance of media literacy and the challenges of combating fake news - information that may be not only harmful but even, in some cases, deadly, as we have seen during this pandemic.

This is the point emphasized by Chequeado, a non-profit fact-checking site in Argentina, in its article about COVID-19 and the associated "infodemic" of misleading health news. In the same vein, Kasisomayajula Viswanath of Harvard University's Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences explains the danger of public health misinformation in digital platforms. Journalist Carolyn Gramling takes a similar approach to climate change, while Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), analyzes the impact of disinformation on political and electoral processes. Former Washington Post Editor Martin Baron discusses the challenges of practicing journalism in an increasingly toxic environment. UNESCO's Alton Grizzle advocates media and information literacy as a global information and education project, as does journalist David Cox, who emphasizes the vital role public education plays in ensuring strong and sustainable media, societies and democratic institutions. Carlos Jornet, President of IAPA's Committee on Press Freedoms, calls for a similar effort at the individual level, stressing the importance of accountability and verifying information before passing it on to others. Finally, Horacio Ruiz, also part of our team at IAPA, provides great insights on content moderation.

I would like to thank the staff of Hemisphere and the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center for the opportunity to provide this important content for its readers, and to the contributors for making possible this special edition.

There is no escaping misinformation in the digital world; however, it is our hope that these articles will provide readers with new perspectives on the challenges we face today, giving them the tools to defend freedom of expression and stand up against fake news.

Ricardo Trotti
Executive Director
Inter American Press Association

TRUTH:

THE WHOLE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH.

NO. 313. NEW YORK, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1880. PRICE ONE CENT.

GARFIELD'S POLITICAL DEATH WARRANT.

HIS INFAMOUS LETTER ADVOCATING THE INCREASED IMMIGRATION OF CHINESE CHEAP LABOR.

FAC SIMILE OF THE LETTER IN WHICH HE DECLARES HIMSELF ADVERSE TO THE LABORING MAN'S INTEREST, AND IN FAVOR OF THE EMPLOYERS' UNION—ADVISING THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE CHEAPEST LABOR AVAILABLE.

Personal and Confidential

House of Representatives.

Washington, D. C., Aug. 23, 1880

Dear Sir,

Yours in relation to the Chinese problem came duly to hand.

I take it that the question of employees is only a question of private and corporate economy, and individuals or companies have the right to buy labor where they can get it cheapest.

We have a treaty with the Chinese government which should be religiously kept until its provisions are abrogated by the action of the general Government, and I am not prepared to say that it should be abrogated, until our great manufacturing and corporate interests are conserved in the matter of labor.

Very truly yours,

J. A. Garfield.

H. L. Morey,
Employers' Union,
Lynn, Mass.

Facsimile of the front page of the New York newspaper The Truth featuring the Morey Letter which was published during the 1880 United States presidential election. It was purportedly from James A. Garfield, the Republican presidential candidate, and suggested that Garfield was in favor of Chinese immigration at a time when many Americans strongly opposed it. The letter was subsequently declared a forgery. Getty Images.

The Truth Revolution

by Ricardo Trotti

Disinformation and misinformation have permeated all areas of our society. In this new reality, all too many of our fellow citizens believe that bleach and other so-called remedies can cure the coronavirus, and that governments and corporations are using vaccines to control humanity.

Conspiracy theories, lies and propaganda have always existed; the difference today is that they are more widespread due to new information technologies, the Internet and social media.

"Alternative facts," "post-truth" and fake news: This type of sensationalism in our recent history can be traced back to the circulation war, over a century ago, between Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst to attract audiences and gain influence for their media. During the World War II era, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, used lies to preach Nazism. Dictatorships in the Southern Cone established "official truths" to drive their communication strategies. And in our own times, populist governments spin emotional narratives to adulterate the truth, whether to deny poverty and inflation or repel interference from foreign governments.

We are privileged to live in this digital age, which is complex and fascinating in terms of freedom of expression. The digital ecosystem has generated new spaces that empower users to create, disseminate and share information, but at the same time, the abuses and misuses of new communication technologies have magnified the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Hate speech, bullying and smear tactics have all played a major role in polarizing relevant issues of public debate.

Regulating the digital space has proved tricky. The same new technologies have been used for censorship, content blocking, surveillance and harassment, as well as cyberattacks and other forms of violence. Often, the remedies prescribed to offset these problems are worse than the illness, creating excessive regulations and giving private companies extreme power over content.

In an interview with the Spanish newspaper El País, journalist and biographer Walter Isaacson argued that, in addition to ushering in a revolution in knowledge and innovation, digital platforms have also "contributed to division, they have dynamited democracy, they promote humiliation and fierce fights." This is a trend that is bound to be exacerbated with new advances in communication technologies, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and electronic espionage, instruments that can be used for good or evil.

On the positive side, one could argue that never before in the history of humanity has the truth been so valued. Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, Brexit and the elections in Catalonia are prime examples of why the truth is so important. Governments, digital platforms, the media, and civil society have become aware of the importance of truth in human relationships and democracy ever since fake news became a popular term during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Our task now is to find the mechanisms to control lies, educate the public about media literacy, create more fact-checking tools, and prevent regulation from affecting the freedom of expression it has taken so long for societies to build.

New environment

For many experts, digital platforms wield too much power over their content. Asking private companies, such as Facebook or Google, to regulate and censor themselves is counterproductive, these observers argue, because, in their zeal for efficiency, they may engage in censorship without due process.

Kasisomayajula Viswanath, Lee Kum Kee Professor of Health Communication in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health and a contributor to this issue, argues that "social media platforms are one of the most significant abettors to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and their algorithms have compounded the problem." Social media companies, he adds, "should not be absolved of the role they have played in spreading medical misinformation and disinformation" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most social media companies have already implemented measures to address these challenges, but the

problem is massive and there is no silver bullet.

In late May 2021, the European Commission (EC) proposed that digital platforms adjust algorithms that encourage online disinformation. The EC accused the industry of failing to comply with the code of practice against disinformation signed in 2018 by Google, Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft, TikTok, and Mozilla, among other leading companies.

The EC also asked digital platforms to commit to "concrete measures to mitigate risks" so that the algorithms do not feed "the viral spread of disinformation" but instead increase the visibility of reliable information in the public interest. The new proposal asks platforms to demonetize disinformation by limiting ads alongside misleading or malicious content.

The problem of disinformation is compounded when it is generated by public figures. Former U.S. President Donald Trump supported disinformation when he encouraged Russian interference in the 2016 elections, and the remaining four years of his term saw countless similar efforts. The trend gained even more ground in the 2020 elections, culminating in the assault by Trump supporters on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. A consequence of these actions was the permanent blocking of Trump's accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitch and TikTok, as well as the removal of the conservative Parler app from Amazon, Apple and Google.

In early June 2021, after much internal deliberation, Facebook banned Trump from its platform for two years after concluding that he encouraged the use of violence

in the attack on the Capitol. The decision came in spite of the fact that Facebook's Oversight Board, while justifying the temporary suspension of the accounts in January, objected to the platform's indefinite censorship of Trump.

In response to complaints that it does not hold all public figures to the same criteria, Facebook announced the implementation of a color code to alert users to posts that encourage hatred in contexts of violence and civil unrest. A Facebook yellow code now means suspension for up to a month. A red code, like the one Trump received, bans the user from the service for two years.

What is striking about these actions is their inconsistency. In a speech at Georgetown University in 2019, Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg said that the company would not moderate political speech or verify the content of political ads because political opinions, even if false, are relevant and in the public interest. Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter, has made similar claims.

The Inter-American Press Association agreed with Facebook's Oversight Board in its reaction to the ban on Trump. If the issue were language that was an "incitement to violence" or an "encouragement to insurrection," the platforms could have deleted the messages that they considered illegal, ordered a brief suspension of the account, or taken the case to court to await a ruling on censorship issues.

Digital platforms like to claim that they are simple content distributors, not content creators like the media. The question then arises as to whether these companies should maintain the protection afforded them under Section 230 of

the Communications Decency Act, which exempts them from liability for the content that users upload to their platforms. To many legislators, the platforms' behavior equates to that of the media, and therefore they must be held responsible.

The concept of self-regulation and content moderation by digital platforms is also controversial. In May 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed Senate Bill 7072, the first of its kind, which he claims will protect state residents from Silicon Valley "power-grabbing over speech, thought and content." The Big Tech Bill, as DeSantis calls it, would allow state users and the government to sue platforms over bans or censorship, or for deprioritizing candidates for state office. The law mandates that platforms be transparent about their moderation and notify users of their actions. Companies found to violate the law could be fined up to $250,000 a day for some actions. Currently, the bill is on hold after legal challenges.

Legislators often forget that laws already impose criminal penalties on social media and Internet sites for crimes such as advocating violence, hate speech, racism, child pornography and human trafficking. Going beyond that can be risky. In many countries, governments are beginning to implement social media legislation with no First Amendment-type protections.

In Nicaragua, for example, an October 2020 law imposes penalties of up to five years in prison for spreading false news on social media or the Internet. In El Salvador, a bill to reform the Penal Code punishes anyone who raises a false alarm with up to five years in jail. In late October of last year, the government of Argentina proposed the creation of Nodio (Nohate), an official body

to protect citizens from false news. In Brazil, a law regulates fake news on the Internet, including messages distributed on WhatsApp. In Chile, three bills on false news were presented in December, including proposals to impose prison time and fines for claims about the pandemic or electoral processes. Similar efforts are ongoing in Panama, Peru and Uruguay.

Protect speech, even if it is false

Any action or public policy intended to combat disinformation should be based on standards of freedom of expression and the right of the public to know. The EC, for example, is refining its tools with care. Disinformation, the EC maintains, is a "harmful but not an illegal" phenomenon, and it argues that freedom of expression must always be on the minds of those who regulate the media.

To preserve freedom of expression, we must avoid falling into a regulatory frenzy that could promote a greater evil than the one that is being remedied by censoring debates that should be open to the public. Many media investigations – the Panama Papers, FIFAgate, Paradise Papers, Odebrecht, or the Russia plot – were originally branded as false news. A law that legalizes censorship could have restricted these investigations at their origin, with devastating consequences for the right of the public to be informed.

In an essay for the IAPA, Marcelino Bisbal cites Catalina Botero, the former Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as saying that "a system of control of the right of expression on behalf of the supposed guarantee of the correctness and veracity of the information that society receives can be a source of great abuses and violates the right to information that that same society has."

For Vera Jourová, Vice President of the EC's Commission for Securities and Transparency, the goal is not for platforms to exercise censorship by eliminating content, but rather to "root fact-checking in their systems so that it is a systematic action, more intense, and that also guarantees that the platforms themselves are not the ones that decide what is reliable and what is not."

A 2018 report by the European Commission's High-Level Group on fake news and disinformation argues against regulation when it comes to disinformation. It prioritizes the need to create media and digital literacy programs to support media financial sustainability by asking platforms to pay them for the news content they use.

These issues were raised in the "Guide to Guarantee Freedom of Expression Regarding Deliberate Disinformation in Electoral Contexts," prepared by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression. They are also central to the IAPA's 2018 Salta Declaration, the first document on freedom of expression in the digital age that assigns rights and responsibilities equally to journalists, media, politicians, governments, platforms and users. These publications urge governments to avoid using excessive, disproportionate regulations and criminal law to punish public opinion and debate. At the same time, however, they hold governments responsible for creating shields against disinformation in electoral processes and avoiding the distribution, creation or manipulation of third-party fake news campaigns.

Both the OAS and UNESCO encourage states, academia, and civil society to create media literacy campaigns to combat disinformation and misinformation. The EC encourages making it easier for users to notify social media and digital platforms about dubious posts, with guarantees that they will receive information on how their complaint has been processed and warnings when they interact with content that verifiers have deemed false.

In the words of Sam Wineburg, a professor of education and history at Stanford University, "online, critical ignoring is just as important as critical thinking." He points out, "fact-checkers engage in what we call lateral reading, opening up new tabs across the top of their screens to search for information about an organization or individual before diving into a site's contents. Students can be taught to read the Internet this way."

Information professionals, including the press, journalists, and social media platforms, must make an effort to regain the public's trust. Just as politicians should strive for more transparency and scientists to raise awareness about climate change, information professionals must work on truth and trust.

Fortunately, good information still prevails despite rivers of misinformation, and both public and private actors are seeking tools for differentiating the truth from the lie, the good from the bad. This implies having the necessary wisdom to approach the debate from the perspective of freedom of expression, for living with lies is the price to pay for living in freedom.

Ricardo Trotti is Executive Director of the Inter American Press Association.

No Time for Silence

by Martin Baron

During the last four to five years, journalists in the United States have begun to have some idea of the challenges their Latin American colleagues have faced for decades.

We now know that our democracy is more fragile than we ever imagined. We also know that our institutions are not as strong as we thought they were. We have come to realize how vulnerable the independent press can be when subjected to ruthless and large-scale attacks.

For four years, the United States had a president who attacked us incessantly and with unlimited resentment. Donald Trump's goal was to undermine the constitutionally protected role of a free and independent press.

The past year in particular was unlike any other that we have experienced or could have expected. Who would have predicted a pandemic or global economic collapse?

From a broader perspective, the public realm in which we work is simply toxic. Today's reporters are practicing journalism during one of the most polarized and worrying times in recent history.

The current deep political divisions in our country mean that we cannot agree on the most basic facts. Even worse, we cannot agree on what constitutes fact.

Societies generally rely on certain elements to determine this. First, we build on education; then, we build on expertise and experience; finally, we rely on evidence to determine a fact. The environment in which we live, however, has devalued these elements. Instead of inspiring security and confidence, they are viewed with suspicion.

Too many people no longer want to be informed. On the contrary, they want to be affirmed. They don't want to be told the facts; they just want to be told that they are right.

Are we headed towards an extreme tribalism where we only accept what our ideological soulmates believe? Are we doomed to develop a deeper skepticism, a belief that everyone lies for selfish reasons? Or have people just concluded that no one can ever really know what is true and what is false, so there is no use in trying to find out?

Many people react to conflict with avoidance, staying silent, self-conscious, allowing the fear of confrontation and defamation to take over. But we in the press have a special responsibility. We can never be silent. Our right to freedom of expression is meaningless if we do not exercise it.

This is no time for silence or shyness. Instead, the challenges call for renewed determination on our part. We have to remind ourselves what it means to be good journalists.

First and foremost, to me, this means having a soul. Having a soul implies that we understand the fundamental mission of journalism, which is the search for truth and a deep commitment to rooting it out. It also requires tenacity, having the willpower to resist the most ruthless attacks.

Truth can be elusive, and it involves more than facts. It requires context, emphasis and perspective. But it is not so elusive that it cannot be understood.

As I think back and recall the most important work of my career, I can cite many instances in which the media that I directed faced mistrust, criticism and rejection. Despite these challenges, we forged ahead and reported and published what we knew.

I recently retired from the Washington Post. I have, however, not retired from journalism. I hope to remain a voice for the reporters around the world who work under immense pressure and at great risk.

In a democracy, citizens take it for granted that the press is guaranteed. This complacency needs to end; if not, the public will find itself without a free press. People will quickly realize that they have lost their freedom of expression, and without freedom of expression, democracy does not exist.

In the same way that the public has taken the press for granted, we in the press have taken the public for granted. People don't understand us. They are confused, frustrated, and sometimes upset about the way journalism is practiced. We must do a better job of communicating who we are as journalists, how we do our work, and why we do what we do.

My hope is that I will be able to continue to help with these efforts for years to come. I enter this new chapter in my life with immense gratitude for the trust of my colleagues in this profession.

Martin Baron is the former executive editor of The Washington Post (2012-2021). This article is an excerpt of the speech he gave upon accepting the 2021 Chapultepec Grand Prize awarded by the Inter American Press Association on April 20, 2021.

Media and Information Literacy in the 'Next Normal': Critical Thinking beyond COVID-19

by Alton Grizzle[1]

We are living in an era in which promoting media and information literacy for all is indispensable. As the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our world, disinformation and misinformation have become public enemy number one and a primary concern of the international development community. Data are the new gold: Whoever controls data 'governs' the people, some experts argue, raising concerns about the data race among digital communications platforms. Many people worry about losing control over their personal data, while others fear that the last bastion of privacy, our minds, is being breached to manipulate how we think and respond to information, events or situations. As one student participating in a project on "digital self-determinism" at Harvard Law School's Berkman Klein Center for Internet Society put it, "There's just so much information, so there's this burden of having no excuse not to know… And there's so much disinformation, that filtering out reliable from unreliable content has become so overwhelming." [2]

In a connected world, media and information literacy is essential for advocating one's rights online while respecting the rights of others. Increasingly, international organizations are pushing for recognition of these goals. For 40 years, the UNESCO Global Media and Information Literacy Alliance has called on the development community to prioritize media and information literacy to cultivate critical competencies and powers of discernment. Such competencies help people recognize disinformation and misinformation, while simultaneously allowing them to benefit more fully from the opportunities offered by new information flows and digital technology.

In 2019, 193 countries supported the proclamation of UNESCO's Global Media and Information Literacy Week. In March 2021, the United Nations General Assembly formalized this effort at the international level, further cementing the mainstream and urgent importance of media and information literacy. In a historic move, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included critical thinking, civic engagement, and access to information in their targets (e.g., SDG 4, Quality Education, and SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The European Commission too has decided to make media literacy one of its priorities, most recently following the 2018 report of its High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation.

In addition to concerns about disinformation and data protection, the significance of media and information literacy to development cannot be overstated. Today's complex information and communication landscape provides unprecedented opportunities for diversity of voices and self-expression, access to information, social engagement through intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and lifelong learning. Take, for example, the opportunity to engage citizens in truth seeking by stimulating critical responses to social and democratic discourses and building media and information literacy.

In a period of heightened misinformation, alternate facts and "post-truths," ensuring a diversity of views and voices by defending access to information and freedom of expression paradoxically both aids and hinders the pursuit of truth.[3] Censorship, however, is not an acceptable alternative. As Mark Pearson notes, "events are unfolding much more quickly now. It would be an historic irony and a monumental shame, if press freedom met its demise through the sheer pace of irresponsible truth-seeking and truth-telling today. Our challenge is

to educate our fellow citizens on the mindful use of this fragile freedom before their elected representatives take further steps to erode it."[4]

René Hobbs reminds us that media and information literacy are a relational ethic,[5] highlighting the various ways we come to know and interpret information and messages around us. They are also intrinsic to self-care, for to exercise our freedom effectively and manage our behavior, we need to know ourselves and strive for self-improvement. We cannot do this without the media and information literacy competencies to manage our engagement with information, digital platforms and media. This information, coupled with our experiences and choices, influences who are, what we think and how we behave.

In the context of the coronavirus crisis, self-awareness and self-care could not be more appropriate. Beyond that, however, media and information literacy help us interact with information to promote self-growth and the growth of others. UNESCO's recently released *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while Respecting Freedom of Expression*, offers far-reaching recommendations for how to tackle the "disinfodemic" without compromising freedom of expression.

In a multimodal and mediated information landscape, we need a media- and information-literate populace that is informed, engaged and empowered. To achieve this, we need to make media and information literacy a normal part of education and learning, whether in the classroom, digital spaces, families or communities. This requires a 'deep dive' into sustainable and purposeful national and institutional policies and strategies that are beyond the scope of this short article. Two important aspects, however, are fundamental: acting now to ensure that digital platforms promote media and information literacy through multi-stakeholder engagement, and taking steps to cultivate a rebirth of public intellectualism.

Just as media and information literacy enables people to self-protect online while maximizing the opportunities available to them, the same competencies help users understand the importance of the Internet to social development and to engage in promoting open, rights-based, accessible and multi-stakeholder governance of the Internet. The time has come for the global community to advance and embrace an international, multi-stakeholder framework for private digital communications companies to promote media and information literacy.

Finally, a rekindling of public intellectualism could help us advance media and information literacy into the 'next normal.' Those who have expertise in media and information literacy, and in any field for that matter, should at some level contribute to the public good, engaging in public debate and contributing to public policies.

Alton Grizzle works at UNESCO headquarters in Paris as the program specialist in communication and information and the co-manager of UNESCO's global actions on media and information literacy.

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[1] This paper was written as part of the author's work as Program Specialist in the Section for Media and Information Literacy and Media Development, UNESCO. The ideas and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

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Content Moderation: Beyond Self-Regulation

by Horacio Ruiz

The debate over the regulation of Internet content jumped to the top of the political agenda in January 2021, when, after supporters of President Donald Trump staged an assault on the Capitol, Twitter, Facebook and other platforms blocked the president's personal accounts. In some cases, the bans also prevented the downloading of applications that the president's followers could exploit.

Leaders from across the ideological spectrum spoke for or against the decisions taken. In particular, questions arose over the ability of private actors with a strong global presence to control the dissemination of information.

Initiatives aimed at regulating the Internet also resurfaced. The Inter American Press Association (IAPA) defined its position based on the 2018 Salta Declaration on freedom of expression in the digital age. It states that individual rights related to freedom of speech and expression must be treated equally in digital and traditional environments, and that legislation and public policies must ensure that digital spaces are neutral, accessible to all, and in line with human rights.

The Salta Declaration also states that regulations should not inhibit expressions of public interest in digital spaces and agrees with the American Convention on Human Rights that the blocking and filtering of content constitutes prior censorship. The declaration refers only to governments and not private actors; however, it calls on technological intermediaries to respect and promote freedom of expression, even when faced with pressure from governments or other powerful groups.

In a virtual forum at the IAPA Mid-Year Meeting in April 2021, Alexandra Walden, head of Google's global policy for human rights and freedom of expression, described her company's commitment to self-regulation and content regulation as based on four basic functions: eliminate, reduce, increase and reward.

In considering whether to eliminate content, she said, Google strives for transparency in how the rules are applied. The "increase" function, she explained, means raising the volume of certain voices with the authority to report and inform the public. These voices often are representative of quality journalism. Google also seeks to develop new functions, such as breaking news, the main daily news, information panels, and other tools that provide additional context for understanding topics.

When Google talks about "reduction," Walden said, it means reducing the type of content that is on the edge of validity. "We have policies to remove what is in violation, but when there is content that is borderline violation of our policies, we make decisions about how to remove that content to ensure that it is not something that has been spread, to limit harmful content," she remarked.

Google "rewards" by allowing creators to monetize once they have complied with the rules on platforms such as YouTube. "Moderating content is not just about removing," Walden observed. "It is also about creating space for smaller voices so that the free and open Internet is preserved."

In recent years, Walden acknowledged, public debate has grown about the roles and responsibilities of technology companies. Despite the challenges and the ways its platforms and technology can be misused, Google remains "fundamentally optimistic" about the power of innovation, she said, and is proud of its contribution to technology, web development, and the democratization of access to information. The company recognizes the need for smart regulation but hopes that, if governments seek to regulate, they will preserve the thriving ecosystem created by the Internet.

At the same IAPA forum, Pedro Less, Facebook's vice president of public policy for Latin America, emphasized the enormous complexity of content moderation, starting with the fact that 1.8 billion people connect daily to Facebook, sharing posts from different countries and cultures and in multiple languages.

According to Less, the company has developed community rules outlining what type of content is and is not

allowed on Facebook and Instagram, with the intention of creating spaces for expression in which people feel safe and free from abuse, intimidation and exclusion. These norms, Less said, are applied globally, take into account international human rights standards, and are under constant review by civil society, academic and community experts around the world. When the reviewers confront the issue of freedom of expression, they do so "in the service of other values also protected by human rights, such as security, dignity, privacy and authenticity, always taking into account the principles of necessity and proportionality…. This is a task fraught with challenges and tensions, particularly given the dynamics of billions of pieces of content published or shared daily by people who use our platform," Less noted.

Regarding the standards used to suppress Donald Trump's accounts, the Facebook executive cited the Rabat Action Plan developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which distinguishes between freedom of expression and inciting or apologizing for national, racial or religious hatred. This action plan contains recommendations on hate speech from articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that are particularly relevant for social media.

To define restrictions on freedom of expression, the Rabat Action Plan plan recommends a test that consists of six parameters: 1. social and political context; 2. the category of the message sender; 3. the intention to incite the audience against a certain group; 4. the content and form of speech; 5. the extent of the discussion; and 6. the probability of causing harm.

Facebook has an independent oversight board, Less noted, whose rulings are binding and can override the company. So far, the board has resolved seven cases, validating only two of the company's decisions. In

early May, it ruled that Facebook can continue to prevent former President Trump from using its platform but must review its decision within six months.

According to Less, Facebook is also committed to increasing accountability in its content moderation practices. After exhausting their opportunities for appeal on the platform, he noted, users can bring their cases before the oversight board. This ability is fundamental for eliminating potential biases in community norms and guarding against their uneven application across languages and cultural contexts.

To prevent disinformation from going viral, Less said, Facebook strives to give people context for what they are seeing with the aid of independent fact-checkers. These fact-checkers label the content that they have classified as false, which considerably reduces its distribution on the platform.

Finally, Less encouraged stronger cooperation between social media platforms and the media. "The media are essential to contribute, to qualify, and review the accuracy of the content that can be published in our platform," he maintained. "The media constantly analyze content from the social networks of relevant actors in society. Although we have been working with media outlets such as Animal Político or the French news agency AFP, there is still much to do together in terms of data verification, which is especially effective in protecting the integrity of electoral processes."

For his part, Gustavo Gómez, Executive Director of the Latin American Observatory for Media Regulation and Convergence (Observa.com), pointed out that while companies that offer social networking services or search engines are essential for the exercise of these rights, their role as public spaces also brings with it risks. As an example, he

cited authoritarian governments that pressure these companies to silence criticism of their regimes.

While the Internet has eliminated obstacles to information and knowledge, Gómez added, it has also expanded the possibilities of blocking that knowledge, with the role of gatekeeper being performed by companies that seek to monetize their services. A single company is used by 98% of all Internet users to find the information they are looking for, he noted. Likewise, that company can eliminate the account of a democratically elected president and prevent access by millions of people to what that president has to say.

"A single company can erase all the media in a country like Australia due to business decisions, and that is a power we have never seen. Any democracy needs … an open, free, plural, diverse space, not to mention journalists and media that can fulfill their role, and users who feel capable of accessing everything that is published without biases or discrimination of access to contents of public interest, and without being regulated differently from international standards," said Gómez.

The answer, he suggested, lies in creating democratic, intelligent, balanced standards compatible with international norms, not regulating online content. Guarantees must be established so that intermediaries such as Facebook, Google or Twitter are not pressured or forced by governments to be responsible for the content they publish, so they do not become the private police of those regimes. In other words, regulations are needed to protect intermediaries from authoritarian governments and, at the same time, protect citizens from possible abuses by those intermediaries.

Horacio Ruiz is Publications Director at the Inter American Press Association.

GLOBAL SUMMIT ON DIS**i**NFORMATION

The phenomenon of disinformation has increased exponentially in recent years, driven by the viral spread of false, misleading content and information taken out of context on social media and the Internet.

"Fake news" disguised as real facts has weakened public trust in the media, making it essential for journalists to explore new strategies and efforts to combat misleading content. Vetting routines, early detection and digital tools have all proven useful in detecting false information that puts the population at risk.

To help further such efforts in our hemisphere, the Inter American Press Association, along with the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at Florida International University, the Argentina Desconfío Project and Bolivia's Foundation for Journalism, are organizing the Global Summit on Disinformation.

An annual online event offered free to all participants, the Global Summit on Disinformation aims to share knowledge and build alliances and networks between the different actors dedicated to combating disinformation throughout the world. More than 20 international speakers will participate, sharing projects, tools and workshops in four main areas:

- Disinformation and democracy
- Educating the public on misinformation
- Artificial intelligence and journalism
- The challenges of fact-checking

Confirmed participants include representatives of First Draft, The Trust Project, The Knight Center, MisInfoCon, Maldita.es, Google, Agencia Lupa, SIP/IAPA and the Desconfío project.

The Global Summit on Disinformation offers a valuable opportunity to establish alliances between researchers, the media and digital platforms. Students, journalists, professors and government officials are invited to attend to learn about tools and strategies for preventing the spread of misinformation.

www.cumbredesinformacion.com   @cumbredesinfo

Armed with Information: Educating the Public about Fake News

by David Cox

Ever since the emergence of social media and the spread of false, misleading information and erroneous content on the web, we are confronted with different shades of reality. It has become increasingly difficult to discern fact from fiction. Clever technology is used to alter digital images and videos, preying on our biases and tricking us into believing what we want to believe.

In his farewell presidential address in January 2017, Barack Obama predicted that social media filters, and their ability to uphold biases and partisan views, would be one of the biggest threats to democracy in the coming years.

"For too many of us," Obama observed, "it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or college campuses, or places of worship or our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste—all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable." The danger, he argued, is when we become so secure in our bubbles that we accept only information that fits our opinions.

Of course, Obama could not know that his successor, Donald Trump, would take "Fake News" to a whole new level. Even before he was inaugurated, Trump began using the term to refer to any news he did not like.

In media columnist Margaret Sullivan's analysis,[1] under the Trump administration, the battle to control the media started as a way to implement what the government wanted people to hear. Trump used the media as a means of propaganda, where "you repeat things and you say them in different ways," and continue to repeat them as truth.

Sullivan's BBC report, which aired in 2018, goes on to argue that leaders around the world, such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, saw "Fake News" propaganda as an opportunity to discredit the media. Bolsonaro became known as the "Trump of the Tropics," using his claims of "Fake News" to control the media, spread misinformation, weaken democracy and accumulate more power. During a meeting in Washington in 2019 to promote US-Brazilian relations, Bolsonaro publicly slammed the media for spreading "Fake News." At the joint news conference, Trump immediately took the opportunity to make a statement and said that he was "very proud" to hear the Brazilian leader use the term.

In practice, Bolsonaro's use of misinformation as a political weapon had more far-reaching repercussions than simply controlling his narrative and misinforming the public: It had a devastating effect on people's lives in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, Julie Ricard and Juliano Medeiros noted in an essay published by Harvard's Kennedy School, under "President Jair Bolsonaro, the leader of the coronavirus-denial movement," Brazil become the Latin American country with the most confirmed cases of the virus and the twelfth worldwide. Bolsonaro's "recurring statements about COVID-19 have become one of the main vectors of misleading content," the authors argued. [2]

Sullivan called on the media to stand up against false information. One of the greatest dangers of Trump's attacks on the press, she argued, was the phrase he used in many speeches describing the press as the "enemy of the people." Such language has the effect of turning people against journalists who are not only defending one of the pillars of democracy, but also attempting to inform about the reality we are experiencing.

That is why it is more important now than ever for journalists to educate the public about the dangers of "Fake News" and for all of us to resist the temptation of retreating into our bubbles.

It won't be an easy task; while the Internet gives each one of us access to unlimited content, it is also fraught with disinformation, and we are free to choose social media sites that agree with our views.

The good news, however, is that we are seeing journalists and the media battle "Fake News" through truth and education. *The Washington Post*, for example, changed its slogan in 2017

Flying over a pro-Bolsonaro demonstration on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on September 7, 2021, Brazil's Independence Day, a plane pulls a banner that reads "Twitter Shuts You Up? Come to GETTR and Speak." GETTR, a U.S. social media platform that targets conservative voters, was founded by Jason Miller, a former Donald Trump aide and spokesman, and officially launched on July 4, 2021. MAURO PIMENTEL/AFP via Getty Images.

from "The paper that digs deeper" to "Democracy dies in darkness." Reportedly, investigative journalist and author Bob Woodward discovered the phrase while reading a First Amendment case.

According to the paper, the goal of introducing the new slogan was to establish "a long-standing reputation for providing news and information with unparalleled analysis and insight." Also in 2017, *The New York Times'* "Truth Is Hard" campaign won the International News Media Association's top global news media award. "Truth. It's more important now than ever," read the advertisement posted on *The New York Times* building.

CNN searched for its own creative ways to help the public with media literacy, introducing its "Facts First" campaign to counteract "Fake News." During the pandemic, these types of media literacy campaigns could not have been more vital. One could even argue that they have saved lives. An example is "This Is a Mask," a CNN video demonstrating the effectiveness and importance of wearing a face covering during the pandemic.

These are all positive signs that show that the media is doing its part to educate the public about media literacy. Journalists everywhere continue to tell the truth no matter how hard that is when confronted with a barrage of "Fake News."

In 2017, the Knight Foundation and Gallup created the NewsLens project, an experimental platform and news aggregator to research how people interact with news online. According to the Knight Foundation, data collected during the 2020 election challenges the "conventional wisdom that Americans consume news in partisan echo chambers." The data showed that when presented with a range of options, audiences frequently "choose a varied media diet, including sources that don't align with their politics." NewsLens also discovered that Americans tend to rate the quality of online news content higher if they think it is personally relevant to them.

The data uncovered by the Knight Foundation is encouraging. It shows that the public is not so easily fooled. Undoubtedly, more initiatives like this project are needed to help us understand how best to combat misleading information and propaganda in this new digital era.

Nolan Higdon, the author of *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Education* (University of California Press, 2020), is one among many scholars who are contributing their knowledge to educate the public and provide a guide to media literacy. Similarly, Darrell M. West, Vice President and Director of Governance Studies and a Senior Fellow of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution, has called on government, business and consumers to work together to solve the problems of false information. Technology companies should invest in tools that not only identify fake news but also combat it and improve online accountability, he argues, especially since, according to the Pew Research Center, young people are more likely to get their news from online and mobile sites. [3]

This won't be an easy task, but as the Knight Foundation's research has showed, the public is not so easily taken in by misleading information, and true facts can win over false news. A society built on facts will ensure that democracies continue to thrive, but without a free press, democracy dies in darkness.

David Cox is an author and journalist, and a former CNN producer. He has written for the Sunday Times, Miami Herald, and Ecoamericas.

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The Revealing Message from My Naive Friend

by Carlos Jornet

A few weeks ago, during winter in the Southern Hemisphere city where I live, it snowed for the first time in 14 years. The following day, a friend sent me a photo supposedly taken in a park a short distance from downtown of four pumas resting on the white blanket of snow.

According to the caption, the pumas had escaped from a nature preserve at the foot of a nearby mountain range. After a quick search on Google image, I explained to my friend that the scene was actually from a blog about the *Ruta de los Parques* (Parks Route) in Chile's Patagonia region, 1,800 kilometers from the South Pole.

This anecdote is a trivial one, but the mix up is telling: Whoever first sent the photo linked it to the story of the pumas fleeing the reserve with the clear intention of falsifying reality. It may well have been a joke, but the image soon went viral, and, like my friend, the recipients trusted the content that their close contacts were sending them. It is easy to imagine how the same process could lead to dire consequences when the intent of the information is to generate collective panic; provoke protests; harm a political, social or business sector; or manipulate public opinion in elections.

Just as timely information on matters of social interest is key to strengthening public debate, disinformation generates confusion, promotes confrontation and spreads hatred. It is a virus that spreads with incredible speed and seriously deteriorates the construction of citizenship.

Greater freedom, more responsibility

The Internet allows billions of people around the world to generate

and share content. All they need is a personal computer or mobile phone and a connection to the global network. In 2021, a global report published each January by We Are Social and Hootsuite on the "state of digital" showed a significant increase in several indicators compared to 2020. The total number of Internet users on the planet grew by 7.3% and reached 4,660 million people, while the average daily time spent online was up to 6 hours 54 minutes, 11 minutes more than in 2020. That is the equivalent of more than 106 days a year of Internet browsing.

Internet access greatly expands the possibilities for expression and thus is very valuable. At the same time, however, this access exponentially multiplies the options for political, social or economic groups – often acting anonymously or using bots – to spread false data with the express intent of causing harm, manipulating minds or establishing hateful messages. Creators, thinkers, young people and ordinary citizens now have more freedom to express themselves, but so do those who believe the earth is flat or who oppose vaccines. Even more worrisome, the same potential is available to terrorists and political leaders who distort reality for their own purposes.

A recent study by Stanford University concluded that 8 out of 10 teenagers believe everything they read online. A further 5 out of 10 say that a tweet is credible if it has a good photo, that news is reliable if they receive it from a friend, and that they have no qualms about sharing stories that come from someone in their circle.

In Argentina, a study by the National Communications Agency found that 8 out of 10 adolescents choose the first page of information they find without verifying the origin

of the data or comparing sites. Nine out of 10 of the teenagers surveyed received most of their information through social media, information that is often partial and taken out of context with the goal of reinforcing existing beliefs.

The best antidote? The press

These findings confirm the growing shift among young people away from traditional media as a primary source of information. The same trend is gaining traction among adults, as well; according to the Pew Research Center, 62% of American adults obtained most of their information through social media in 2016, compared to 49% in 2012.

Those of us in the traditional media would argue that news organizations with a responsible editor and a brand consolidated over time provide the best antidote to misinformation.

It is true that the press makes mistakes, and journalists themselves are not immune to the temptation of publishing news from the Internet or social media without sufficient verification. But the media have internal control mechanisms and systems to correct erroneous information. In addition, it is worth clarifying, a news story with errors that have not been sufficiently verified cannot be compared to deliberately false and harmful news of the type that abounds on self-regulated platforms.

At the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), therefore, we are working to contribute to the sustainability of professional journalism, reinforce the methodology for verifying sources (the basis of our credibility with the public), and promote digital literacy programs aimed at developing a culture of confirming the reliability of sources,

verifying and comparing them with other points of view, and analyzing and interpreting information.

At the individual level, all of us will continue to receive photographs and messages that appear to be credible from our friends and contacts. We have a duty to reflect upon and verify that content before we compulsively forward the message and thus contribute, despite our best intentions, to the snowball effect of misinformation.

Carlos Jornet is President of the IAPA's Committee on Freedom of the Press and Information.

Climate Change Disinformation Is Evolving. So Are Efforts to Fight Back

by Carolyn Gramling

Researchers are testing games and other strategies to help people recognize climate change denial

Over the last four decades, a highly organized, well-funded campaign powered by the fossil fuel industry has sought to discredit the science that links global climate change to human emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. These disinformation efforts have sown confusion over data, questioned the integrity of scientists, and denied the scientific consensus on the role of humans in climate change.

Internal documents from fossil fuel giants such as Shell and Exxon outline these disinformation efforts. As early as the 1980s, oil companies knew that burning fossil fuels was altering the climate, according to industry documents reviewed at a 2019 U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform hearing. Yet these companies, aided by some scientists, set out to mislead the public, deny well-established science and forestall efforts to regulate emissions.

Increasingly, however, the effects of climate change on extreme events such as wildfires, heat waves and hurricanes have become hard to downplay. Not coincidentally, climate disinformation tactics have shifted from outright denial to distraction and delay.

As disinformation tactics evolve, researchers continue to test new ways to combat them. Fact-checking untrue statements is one strategy for combating climate disinformation. Another way, increasingly adopted by social media platforms, is to add warning labels flagging messages as possible disinformation, such as the labels Twitter and Facebook (which also owns Instagram) began adding in 2020 regarding the U.S. presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around the same time, Facebook was sharply criticized for a change to its fact-checking policies that critics say enables the spread of climate disinformation. In 2019, the social media giant decided to exempt posts that it determines to be opinion or satire from fact-checking, creating a potentially large disinformation loophole.

In response to mounting criticism, Facebook unveiled a pilot project in February for its users in the United Kingdom, with labels pointing out myths about climate change. The labels also direct users to Facebook's climate science information center.

For this project, Facebook consulted several climate communication experts. Sander van der Linden, a social psychologist at the University of Cambridge, and cognitive scientist John Cook of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., helped the company develop a new "myth-busting" unit that debunks common climate change myths, including assertions that scientists don't agree that global warming is happening.

Cook and van der Linden have also been testing ways to get out in front of disinformation, an approach known as prebunking, or inoculation theory. By helping people recognize common rhetorical techniques used to spread climate disinformation — such as logical fallacies, relying on fake "experts" and cherry-picking only the data that support one's view — the two hope to build resilience against these tactics.

This line of defense may come with a bonus, van der Linden says. Training people in these techniques could build a more general resilience to disinformation, whether related to climate, vaccines or COVID-19.

Cook and van der Linden were asked about debunking conspiracies, collaborating with Facebook, and how prebunking is (and isn't) like getting vaccinated. The conversations, held separately, have been edited for brevity and clarity.

We've seen both misinformation and disinformation used in the climate change denial discussion. What's the difference?

van der Linden: Misinformation is any information that's incorrect, whether due to error or fake news. Disinformation is deliberately intended to deceive. Then there's propaganda: disinformation with a political agenda. But in practice, it's difficult to disentangle them. Often, people use misinformation because it's the broadest category.

Has there been a change in the nature of climate change denialism in the last few decades?

Cook: It is shifting. For example,

we fed 21 years of [climate change] denial blog posts from the U.K. into a machine learning program. We found that the science denialism misinformation is gradually going down — and solution misinformation [targeting climate policy and renewable energy] is on the rise [as reported online in early March at SocArXiv.org].

As the science becomes more apparent, it becomes more untenable to attack it. We see spikes in policy misinformation just before the government brings in new science policy, such as a carbon pricing bill. And there was a huge spike before the [2015] Paris climate agreement. That's what we will see more of over time.

How do you hope Facebook's new climate change misinformation project will help?
Cook: We need tech solutions, like flagging and tagging misinformation, as well as social media platforms downplaying it, so [the misinformation] doesn't get put on as many people's feeds. We can't depend on social media. A look behind the curtain at Facebook showed me the challenge of getting corporations to adequately respond. There are a lot of internal tensions.

van der Linden: I've worked with WhatsApp and Google, and it's always the same story. They want to do the right thing but don't follow through because it hurts engagement on the platform.

But going from not taking a stance on climate change to taking a stance, that's a huge win. What Facebook has done is a step forward. They listened to our designs and suggestions and comments on their [pilot] test.

We wanted more than a neutral [label directing people to Facebook's information page on climate change], but they wanted to test the neutral post first. That's all good. It'll be a few

months at least for the testing in the U.K. phase to roll out, but we don't yet know how many other countries they will roll it out to and when. We all came on board with the idea that they're going to do more, and more aggressively. I'll be pleasantly surprised if it rolls out globally. That's my criteria for success.

Scientists have been countering climate change misinformation for years, through fact-checking and debunking. It's a bit like whack-a-mole. You advocate for "inoculating" people against the techniques that help misinformation spread through communities. How can that help?
van der Linden: Fact-checking and debunking are useful if you do them right. But there's the issue of ideology, of resistance to fact-checking when it's not in line with ideology. Wouldn't life be so much easier if we could prevent [disinformation] in the first place? That's the whole point of prebunking or inoculation. It's a multilayer defense system. If you can get there first, that's great. But that won't always be possible, so you still have real-time fact-checking. This multilayer firewall is going to be the most useful thing.

You've both developed online interactive tools, games really, to test the idea of inoculating people against disinformation tactics. Sander, you created an online interactive game called Bad News, in which players can invent conspiracies and act as fake news producers. A study of 15,000 participants reported in 2019 in Palgrave Communications showed that by playing at creating misinformation, people got better at recognizing it. But how long does this "inoculation" last?
van der Linden: That's an important difference in the viral analogy. Biological vaccines give more or less lifelong immunity, at least for some kinds of viruses. That's not the case for a psychological vaccine. It wears off over time.

In one study, we followed up with people [repeatedly] for about three months, during which time they didn't replay the game. We found no decay of the inoculation effect, which was quite surprising. The inoculation remained stable for about two months. In [a shorter study focused on] climate change misinformation, the inoculation effect also remained stable, for at least one week.

John, what about your game Cranky Uncle? At first, it focused on climate change denial, but you've expanded it to include other types of misinformation, on topics such as COVID-19, flat-earthism and vaccine misinformation. How well do techniques to inoculate against climate change denialism translate to other types of misinformation?
Cook: The techniques used in climate denial are seen in all forms of misinformation. Working on deconstructing [that] misinformation introduced me to parallel argumentation, which is basically using analogies to combat flawed logic. That's what late night comedians do: Make what is obviously a ridiculous argument. The other night, for example, Seth Meyers talked about how Texas blaming its [February] power outage on renewable energy was like New Jersey blaming its problems on Boston [clam chowder].

My main tip is to arm yourself with awareness of misleading techniques. Think of it like a virus spreading: You don't want to be a superspreader. Make sure that you're wearing a mask, for starters. And when you see misinformation, call it out. That observational correction — it matters. It makes a difference.

Carolyn Gramling is the earth and climate writer at Science and News. This article first appeared online on May 18, 2021. It is being republished here with the permission of the author and the Science and News editors.

"Fake News" Distorts Electoral Processes and the Public Sphere

by Luis Almagro

The so-called false news known as "Fake News" has burst onto the social media scene, especially during elections. Fake news has the potential to damage democratic systems. While strategies aimed at spreading rumors or lies about political events or candidates are a long-standing problem that dates back to the emergence of the Internet, this time it is different. This time we are confronted with a new phenomenon that is powered by the link that exists between Fake News and new information technologies, particularly social networks.

While these technologies increase the speed and reach of information,

giving citizens more access to content and preventing censorship, they also fuel the spread of rumors and falsehoods. At the same time, they can be used to disqualify reliable information from journalists or reports by international organizations.

As Secretary General of the OAS, I want to draw special attention to the dissemination of disinformation in our hemisphere by the dictatorships in Venezuela and Cuba. Both countries apply a double standard, persecuting their citizens for using social networks to denounce abuses while taking advantage of the same networks to spread propaganda and interfere in the internal affairs of other countries by spreading false information.

Specialized departments of the OAS define disinformation as the mass dissemination of false information that is put into circulation with the knowledge that it is false and with the intention of harming the public or fragments of society.

This definition is useful because it allows one to distinguish disinformation from other language protected by freedom of expression. The inter-American system emphasizes that the media and journalists should not be prosecuted for publishing inaccurate or false information when they do so without deliberate intention to deceive or damage a person's reputation.

Opinion, political humor and

In 2020, the Special Rapporteurs of United Nations, OSCE and OAS joint declaration of freedom of expression and elections in the digital age reaffirmed that: "States should evaluate the possibility of supporting positive measures to address the problem of online disinformation, such as the promotion of independent actions in the verification of information and public educational campaigns while avoiding adopting norms to criminalize the dissemination of disinformation."

satire are an essential check on power. Even propaganda that seeks to persuade by exaggerating a candidate's virtues should be protected free speech. Such forms of free expression are part of a democratic society, and if there are excesses, they can be remedied through mechanisms such as the ability to rectify the error, the right to reply, and robust public debate.

In today's world, however, digital platforms have become powerful intermediaries between citizens and information, creating endless possibilities for misinformation. During elections, especially, political parties, marketing firms and strategy companies have become active participants in disseminating false information in violation of democratic political ethics.

Deliberate disinformation erodes the legitimacy of electoral processes and distorts the public sphere for two fundamental reasons: first, it impoverishes public debate; and second, it has the potential to delegitimize the result, and the very act, of elections, the process through which a democratic government is founded. We must be firm on this point.

In 2019, the OAS created the first guiding principles to guarantee freedom of expression against disinformation in the electoral context.
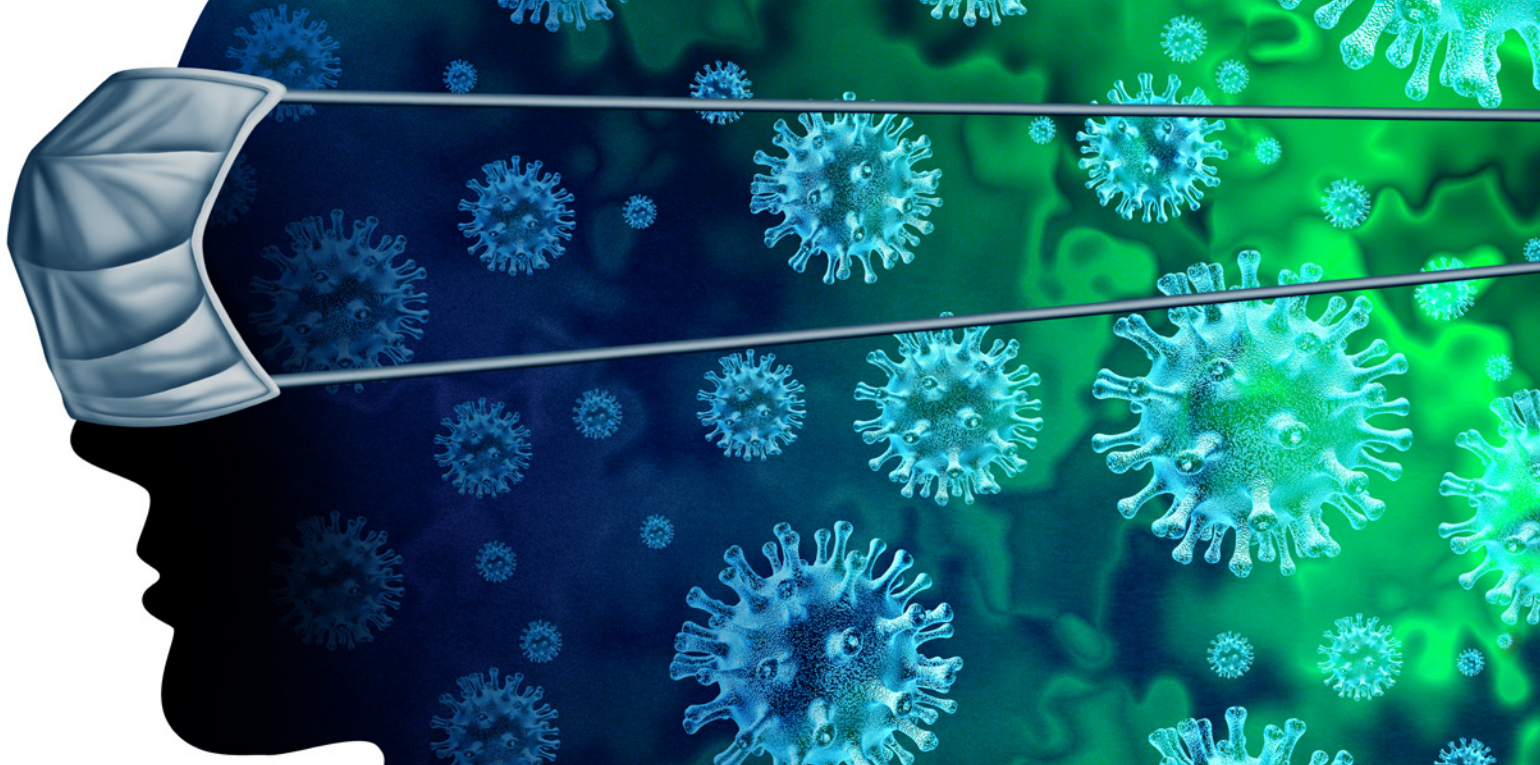
These guiding principles, which were requested by the OAS General Assembly and drafted by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy, establish that a critical attitude and an active citizenry are the best ways to thwart disinformation.

The OAS guide contains recommendations for all actors who can combat the phenomenon of misinformation. They include avoiding the imposition of criminal charges against the perpetrators of Fake News, as such actions only fuel the enemies of freedom of expression.

Electoral authorities must have a proactive role in defending factual information and fair electoral processes. At the same time, digital platforms must invest resources to prevent and combat the phenomenon of misinformation. Public forums are welcome, but they should be accompanied by social responsibilities. It is vital that political actors, parties, candidates, legislators, and government officials debate public affairs without resorting to polarizing speeches, and without engaging in or promoting false information.

Luis Almagro is a lawyer and diplomat and current Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) and its Office of the Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights (REDESCA) have appealed to AOS member states to combat misinformation, skepticism and false news by providing continuous, transparent information with scientific support to address citizen concerns.

Digital Deluge in Science, Misinformation and COVID-19

by Kasisomayajula Viswanath

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore a number of seemingly disparate societal trends whose connections are now more clear.

First, in a span of 20 or so years, the digital revolution has overtaken our lives in ways that few of us anticipated or predicted. The development and penetration of information and communication technologies is far from complete but has already radically and profoundly altered how we work, pray and play. Globally, it is estimated that almost half the population accesses social media platforms and more than half is on the Internet.

Two consequences of this revolution are immediately relevant to the current crisis. These technologies have made possible the generation and dissemination of mountains of information that are beyond the scope of any one individual, organization, or even nation to manage. Estimates range widely, but one organization has reported that 1.7 megabytes of data are generated every second. More germane to COVID-19, even a cursory, unrefined search on the U.S. National Library of Medicine's PubMed shows that close to 150,000 papers on the topic have been published so far. These do not include papers in the social sciences or pre-prints. Easily more than a billion tweets and more than 100 million Facebook posts have commented on the pandemic, not including other social media outlets such as WhatsApp.

Lest we forget, this deluge of information happened in the short span of 17 months!

A second, related trend is how the digital revolution has altered the ways science is communicated and contested. Though there have always

A casual user of the social media platform WhatsApp will have run into a meme on how Bill Gates is responsible for the spread of COVID-19 and will benefit from the vaccines to acquire even more wealth. Other memes, among countless others, discuss how 5G cell towers spread COVID-19 and vaccines allow microchips to be injected into humans or lead to infertility.

been tensions between the culture of science and the culture of journalism, the enterprise of communicating science has generally relied on a delicate dance between organizations that produce scientific knowledge and journalists who translate that science for public consumption. While the dynamic has not always worked perfectly, lay consumers of science information have been generally well-served. Appreciation has grown for the role of science in everyday life, along with trust in scientists.

Scientific knowledge has always been contested, whether by the private sector, such as the tobacco industry's attemps to distort science, or religious or activist groups protesting developments such as vaccines or genetically modified foods. The digital revolution has, however, made it possible for anti-vaccine groups to become active disseminators and interpreters ("distorters") of scientific information. It has become too easy to re-interpret scientific developments to serve one's agenda and sow confusion, fear and anxiety among the public. Free of the organizational imperatives and principles that drive the practice of journalism, activist groups have managed to challenge the critical gatekeeping role of journalists and counter the vital public health mitigation measures necessary to stem the pandemic.

As a result, misinformation and disinformation have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, undercutting efforts to build public support for public health actions to stop the spread and promote prevention. While misinformation and disinformation by themselves are not new, the combination of COVID-19 with ever-evolving scientific knowledge and the digital revolution has proven to be a deadly mix. Disparate forces such as conspiracy theorists, anti-

government groups and anti-vaxxers quickly found common ground and undercut the efforts of governments and scientists, peddling falsehoods and conspiracies. And, with active abetting by some politicians, they even managed to *mainstream* disinformation, such as the effectiveness of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19. With each user of social media platforms gaining the ability, at least in theory, to produce and distribute information, anti-science and anti-vaccine forces have managed to unwittingly enlist the public in spreading misinformation/disinformation across the globe with breathtaking speed.

One of the most frustrating and, arguably, depressing aspects of this trend is the inequities that seem to pervade every facet and dimension of the current pandemic. That social determinants of health along the fault lines of class, race, ethnicity and place could potentially increase the suffering of some groups more than others is widely acknowledged in global health. That we have not drawn on this basic scientific knowledge to devise programs, policies and practices to blunt the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the underserved is an indictment of the global response to COVID-19. When it comes to communications, examples abound. Despite frequent calls from some of us working in this area, the recognition that the digital divide can hamper remote learning among people in lower socioeconomic positions came too late for these groups. It is difficult to estimate the damage to the schoolchildren who have missed out on their education for lack of digital access.

Vaccination is another stark example of inequality. The development of effective vaccines in such a short period speaks to the stunning success of decades of investment in the scientific enterprise. Yet, the fact that high-income countries are managing to

vaccinate their residents at a rapid clip while billions of people in low- and middle-income countries are waiting and likely to wait well into 2022 also speaks to the failures of global health. Even within nations, differences stand out among the majority and minorities and the rich and poor. Digital media are not helping. In addition to misinformation that undermines confidence in vaccines, the reliance on digital technologies to register for vaccines only appears to widen the gap.

This first pandemic of the social media age has showed that COVID-19 is as much a failure of science communications as it is a failure of public health emergency preparedness. It is still not too late for policy and practical measures to change this. The first realization, when it comes to public health communication, is to adopt a global perspective, given that information in the digital age diffuses across borders and no single country can address the problem. Second, we must be laser-focused on bridging inequalities, including those in the digital realm. Third, investments in capacity and capabilities in science communications are crucial, including efforts to promote scientific journalism across the globe.

COVID-19 has caused unimaginable suffering, and we will live with these consequences for decades to come. With some deliberate steps, communication can become our ally in mobilizing political and social forces to reduce that suffering.

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COVID-19 and the Harmful Effects of Misinformation

by Chequeado Team

The year 2020 was the year of the pandemic. It was also the year of disinformation, so much so that the World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term "infodemic" and urged the world to fight this scourge along with the virus that caused COVID-19 and changed the world forever.

Disinformation is no longer an issue confined to politicians, journalists and academics. In a polarized society driven by algorithms, it has become everyone's problem. Perhaps more than ever before, citizens have realized the crucial value of information that is transparent, reliable and timely for making better decisions and even protecting their own lives.

For years, observers have been warning of the dangers of disinformation and its impact on public debate and the democratic system. After the pandemic, that disinformation kills is no longer just a slogan. All around the world, deaths could have been avoided if people had the correct information to protect themselves from the coronavirus. The clearest example in Argentina was the death of a 5-year-old boy in Patagonia who was given chlorine dioxide, touted on social media and television as a cure-all for the virus. Even some doctors claimed the treatment worked, and a news anchor demonstrated its use on primetime.

The problem is not new. Disinformation existed before the pandemic, with sometimes disastrous consequences. In 2012, for example, a mass vaccination program against the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) in Colombia's schools reached more than 90% of the target population. In 2014, however, videos began to circulate on social media claiming to show adolescents fainting after receiving the vaccine. The authorities found no relationship between the teens' symptoms and the HPV vaccine; nevertheless, vaccination rates fell in Colombia following the hoax. In 2012, 98% of young women received the first dose of the vaccine and 88% completed the second dose; by 2016, those percentages had declined dramatically to 14% and 5%, respectively.

Many experts fear a similar phenomenon could affect COVID-19 vaccination rates in Latin America. Numerous false accounts in recent months have spread misinformation about the origin and composition of the vaccine, alleging, among other things, that it is made from aborted fetuses and/or contains microchips or heavy metals. Other rumors distort the way messenger RNA vaccines work and report false adverse effects of vaccines in general.

Of course, misinformation also affects the democratic public debate by distracting from real agendas, forcing people to waste time on topics

that have no scientific basis instead of addressing substantive issues.

The consequences can be most direct during elections. In recent years in Mexico, for example, word has spread that it is possible to vote for more than one candidate, when in fact doing so is grounds for nullifying a ballot. A similar situation has occurred in Chile, where false information has circulated about polling hours or new immigrants' right to vote.

These are just a few examples of the potential harm that can be caused by misinformation. The next question, of course, is how to address the problem.

The first step is to check information and publicly address false claims. It is important to demonstrate in each case why content is false or misleading, as well as how to prove this. In addition to denying specific cases of false information, this process gives people tools to draw on the next time they come across suspicious content and educates them about how to fact-check similar misinformation.

Since 2014, our organization, Chequeado, has coordinated with LatamChequea, a network of fact checkers from all over Latin America whose goal is to share experiences with the media to combat misinformation. But we know that what we do is not enough: We need trained journalists to tackle the phenomenon. For almost a decade, Chequeado has offered courses to thousands of journalists every year about how to stop the spread of misinformation.

The issue is complex: False content may be spread deliberately, for incentives ranging from money to political or personal reasons, or unintentionally. We can all be involuntary vectors of misinformation, but we can all be involved in stopping it as well. Actors at every stage of the information process must participate if we hope to address this global phenomenon.

We must also consider factors such as the way in which disinformation is spread via social media algorithms, and the growing distrust of traditional media. In Latin America and other parts of the developing world, including Africa, weak institutions exacerbate the spread of misinformation. The problem encompasses the poor quality of official data, the lack of professional public communications, and little to no media transparency.

The strategies we employ must consider these complexities. Simple solutions, such as passing laws that prohibit disinformation, would probably be worse than the problem itself. As experiences in some Asian countries have shown, such legislation may restrict freedom of expression without effectively curbing disinformation. Having the ability to define or decide what constitutes misinformation gives enormous power to the body in charge of implementing the regulation, a power that could limit opponents and minorities. Criminalizing disinformation is not a good option when it comes to guaranteeing human rights and the proper functioning of democracy, especially in a region like Latin America, where abuse of power and restrictions on freedom of expression are persistent problems.

Fortunately, states and agencies have many other options to consider in countering misinformation. Above all, efforts must be made to prioritize media and digital literacy among citizens, so that they can differentiate reliable sources of information while being active in the fight against misinformation and the search for quality content.

The way we inform ourselves has changed. We no longer sit down to read the newspaper or watch television; instead, we consume the news on social media, mixed in with photos of a friend's wedding and videos of a relative's vacation. This calls for activating our critical thinking capacity even in moments of leisure and relaxation.

We must work to close the information gap. When no information is available, misinformation multiplies, as we witnessed during the uncertainty of the pandemic. Governments, the media and other institutions can help by identifying the issues that concern people and filling the gaps with quality information.

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but in today's world, it can go viral in minutes, traveling from one mobile phone to another. We need to know and expose the actors behind malicious content production and analyze the factors that make it go viral. We also need to understand how accelerated content consumption, which mixes news with content tailored to personal preferences, affects our biases and prejudices. Understanding the phenomenon will allow us to develop better strategies to counteract the forces that have created such fertile ground for misinformation.

Chequeado is an Argentine-based non-profit, non-partisan digital media affiliated with Fundación La Voz Pública. Laura Zommer is Executive Director and Editor-in-Chief of Chequeado, Olivia Sohr is Director of Impact and New Initiatives, and Martín Slipczuk is Coordinator of LatamChequea. They all contributed to this article.

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