

Analysis on the Effects of Misinformation: Taking Facebook as an Example

Yunhan Liu

*College of communication Boston University, Boston, MA, 02215, the United States
lyh0904@outlook.com*

Abstract: Nowadays, misinformation is widely spread on the Internet. It affects people's minds, defining what they think. Social media platforms such as Facebook started working on solutions, but they have not defeated the issues yet. The following content of this paper analyzes the effects of misinformation in detail, suggesting some possible ways to improve public consciousness. It applies the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication and Agenda Setting Theory to the current issues on Facebook, empathizing the need to address them properly. The research conducted showed that misinformation is especially harmful to information society, in which information is significant for economic, political, and cultural activity. It misleads inadvertently, diminishing the role of truth in reality and the Internet. The application of the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication and Agenda Setting Theory revealed that social media now determines the social agenda, with bloggers and influencers perceived as more credible news informers for people than average news reportages. To address the effects of misinformation, either Facebook or the US government or the US population itself should equally contribute to fighting against misinformation by spreading awareness of the problem in the country. They should organize more initiatives promoting people's immunity to misinformation on the Internet. Only spreading awareness of the problem could help individuals critically evaluate every post they see and remain true to their personal opinions and minds.

Keywords: Misinformation, information society, Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication, Agenda Setting Theory, Facebook.

1. Introduction

Misinformation is a new villain in contemporary society. It shares suspicion and distrust among people, pushing them toward poor decisions and rash actions. Misinformation has always been particularly problematic for social media platforms such as Facebook, on which the propagation of disinformation was mainly used for political purposes [4]. The phenomenon has become especially widespread nowadays in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and now poses a threat to public health as well [11]. Despite the fact that Facebook will increasingly will to admit and fix the problem, it leaves the "heaviest lifting to other people," which raises general resentment and massive public outrage [3]. The measures taken by the platform are not enough to stop propagandist messages and disinformation, and the proliferation of fake news on social media is now a "matter of considerable public and governmental concern [11]. The present study adds to the previous research conducted on the topic, providing analysis from the communication theories perspective. More specifically, the

paper compares and contrasts how the Two-Step Flow Theory of communication and the Agenda Setting Theory explain different expectations of social media's influence. Given these views of the influence of media, it develops a potential solution that a company such as Facebook could employ to create a safe but profitable environment and that a larger institution such as the US government could employ to protect its citizens. The paper argues that either Facebook or the US government or the US population itself should equally contribute to the fighting against misinformation by spreading awareness of the problem in the country. If there are no developments in the future, human rights and many elements of good quality democracy would be undermined, leading to irrational hatred toward each other, violence, and chaos. It hopes that the paper strives to analyze the effects of misinformation shared on Facebook and offer a potential solution.

2. Background Information on Selected Issues

2.1. Misinformation

Before addressing the effects of misinformation shared on Facebook directly, it is necessary to discuss the background information on the selected issue first. Such an approach would allow examining the problem of the propagation of disinformation itself and possible ways to overcome it. At this point, one may find it logical to start from the definition of the misinformation term. Cambridge Dictionary, for instance, defines it as "wrong information, or the fact that people are misinformed" [8]. The source also explains misinformation as "information intended to deceive," which identifies the primary objective of such information itself [8]. In such a manner, the term has a vivid connection with disinformation defined as an "intentional and purposive spread of misleading information" [12]. Unlike misinformation which relates to "unintentional behaviors that inadvertently mislead," it is more dangerous because it bears more manipulative intentions themselves [5]. In this essay, I use both terms as interchangeable. Either misinformation or disinformation causes similar destructive effects in the context of mass media and the contemporary population, regardless of intentional and unintentional character.

2.2. Misinformation Society

Misinformation is especially harmful to information society, in which information is significant for economic, political, and cultural activity. It defines nearly everything people do and how they react, leading to either predictable or unpredictable consequences. In most cases, misinformation is endemic to manipulation that can operate on a subconscious level too. The interconnections between the contemporary population and fake news are described by numerous scholars some time ago. Pickard, for instance, states that the recent years mark the "rise of the misinformation society," signifying the evident prevalence of misinformation in the contemporary world [10]. A similar opinion is shared by many other scholars too. Benkler and Madrigal, for example, define the modern time as an era of "alternative facts" and "post-truth" [2]. In the article entitled "Post-truth: A guide for the perplexed," Higgins explains the current tendencies not only an increase in the frequency of lies in the public sphere but also a world in which truth is no longer an expectation [2]. In the given circumstances, therefore, it becomes especially difficult for an individual to distinguish misinformation from the truth. In a world filled with lies, people cannot remain true to reality and themselves, which may lead to irreversible consequences.

2.3. Contemporary Situation: Misinformation on Facebook

The contemporary issues of misinformation on Facebook vividly represent the above tendencies. They indicate that problem genuinely exists and requires a comprehensive approach to properly resolve them. As Nicky Woolf claims in his article dedicated to Facebook's fake news problem, the recent misinformation outburst happened during the US election, during which fake news actually "outperformed real news on Facebook during the final weeks of the election campaign" [14]. Although Facebook started developing anti misinformation back then, the situation did not significantly change and remains almost the same even now. As Claire Wardle, research director for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, explains, the "way that people receive information now is increasingly via social networks, so any solution that anybody comes up with, the social networks have to be on board" [14]. Since then, Facebook's primary strategy was hiring editors and journalists to indicate inappropriate text and neutralize it. The primary issue in this approach, though, is that "humans are also partial to subjectivity," so that even an overarching "readers' editor" would be a "disproportionately powerful position and open to abuse" [14]. The attempt of Facebook to let the users encounter issues and block the content by themselves did not contribute to the problem resolution either. As was mentioned before, it only made people angry and dissatisfied with social media's policies as a whole [3]. By now, Facebook did not apply any new approaches to address misinformation issues properly [9]. It is still working to stop them [9]. Consequently, the topic of misinformation on Facebook still remains an acute one. It requires more analysis and more consideration to develop an efficient multidimensional approach.

3. Communication Theories

3.1. Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication

3.1.1. Description

Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication is a theory of communication proposing that information reaches the public through certain people who represent it from their own perspective. It is, therefore, typically misinformation since it becomes full of personal biases and prejudices on the way. The specificities of the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication are discussed in detail in Gabriel Weimann's article posted in the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition). As the author claims, the approach suggests that the "flow of information and influence from the mass media to their audiences involves two steps: from the media to certain individuals (i.e., the opinion leaders) and from them to the public [13]. In other words, the theory implies that information frequently becomes misinformation as it becomes delivered through other people. Such a concept, therefore, underlines the subjectivity of individuals' opinions. Our personal biases and life experiences cannot but affect the way we react to and deliver the news, which contributes to the spread of fake news and so-called post-truth. Even though the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication has been a "subject of growing criticism," it eventually became relevant nowadays in the context of information society and the exceptional popularity of mass media services themselves [13]. The tendency is especially vividly seen in the example of influencers and popular bloggers who now have a tremendous impact on millions of social media users. They impose their personal opinions on others, either consciously or not, through their comments on recent events, which contributes to the development of misinformation on the Internet. In this case, therefore, interpersonal interaction has dominant power in shaping public opinion. It is far stronger than mass media outlets that are obligated to stay objective in relation to any information.

3.1.2. Application to the Case

The application of the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication to the case shows that bloggers and influencers on social media have become more credible news informers for people than average news reportages. As the users believe the opinion leaders more than ever, the credibility of the information does not make sense as it is not always high on the public agenda. Such a statement perfectly complies with Higgins' claim that truth is no longer an expectation in modern society [6]. Tired of traditional news portals, social media users become obsessed with interpersonal interaction, which seems more relevant to them. In such a context, it does not matter what opinion leaders say. The information presented will be perceived as credible anyway. What else is notable regarding this perspective is that news accounts never have as many followers as opinion leaders do. For instance, the official News One account has only twenty-four thousand followers, while Britney Spears has almost thirty-nine million. Even the World Health Organization cannot compare to such a number. It has only half the size of Britney one's - twelve million followers. In such circumstances, if News One or any other news account makes a post with the objectively presented information, not many people will see it. If Britney Spears mentioned the same event, her opinion would be accessible to a massive audience of people. What is the most remarkable about this part is that most people would trust Britney's representation of the information, regardless of the subjective context. News One account in such a context remains interesting for no one. Such a tendency underlines the relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication as the schemes presented in it comply with realities on the Internet. The theory shows that information obtained from influencers and bloggers is more relevant for people nowadays, even though it is fake.

3.2. Agenda Setting Theory

3.2.1. Description

Agenda Setting Theory is a communication theory that emphasizes the way information is presented above the content of the news itself. In such a manner, it is easy to make certain issues viral, which contributes to the spread of misinformation in real life and the Internet. The details of the Agenda Setting Theory are presented on the communicationtheory.org site dedicated to theories for communication. Basically, it is a summary of the original article written by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972. As the authors state, the theory is largely about the tricks of media that artificially inflate the meaning of news by prioritizing certain specificities of the events themselves. Moreover, they claim that "the information provided by the media is the most relevant food for thought, depicting major issues in society and reflecting people's minds" [1]. As the particular news reports give importance and attention to some specific aspects, viewers will "automatically see it as the most important news and information available to them" [1]. By using these tricks, the means of media affect the public mind. They decide "what" events to broadcast and the way to represent them on the basis of "newsworthiness" [1]. As the authors of the communicationtheory.org conclude, the Agenda Setting Theory is widely used in political ads, campaigns, business news, PR (public relation), etc. The primary factor that keeps it working, they state, is the so-called "gatekeeping" aspect, which implies that certain people should decide what to show through the media "gates" [1]. All these details make it clear that information itself does not mean much until it is broadcasted in a specific way. The teams of editors work every day to decide how specific groups of individuals should think of the events and how everything should be portrait for them. In such circumstances, people do not have a real choice to make their own assumptions by themselves. Everything is designed and predicted in advance, and it contributes to the spread of misinformation as well.

3.2.2. Application to the Case

The application of the Agenda Setting Theory to the case shows that social media now plays a crucial role in determining the social agenda, therefore, affecting people's minds. It has become a new form of traditional media nowadays, which continues defining public perception of the events. At first sight, it may seem that the theory is no longer relevant in the present day as the value of average news reportages continues to decline. Since bloggers' opinion is more significant for the people now, one may assume that they are average individuals themselves who define issues for public conversation. In fact, though, it is not always true as many power players in traditional media remain involved in social media activity too. To be more specific, traditional media frequently use bloggers' posts as references, and influencers base their personal opinion on what they discovered in news reportages. Such an interconnection point to the fact that the appearance of social media is not an egalitarian breakthrough but the development of traditional forms of media. In the given context, the Agenda Setting Theory remains relevant as it is used to impact public opinion even nowadays. While the delivery of the information changed, the principles remained the same, determining the social agenda. Social networking sites such as Facebook now appear to be among the most active sites of current new media. The information presented in it impacts people's minds significantly, defining their perception of and reaction to the events. In the given circumstances, it is necessary to remember that not only people themselves determine issues for the public conversation on the Internet. It is a solid team of influencers and power players from traditional media that formulates public opinion.

4. Potential Solution and Suggestion

Given the differing views of the influence of media presented in the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication and Agenda Setting Theory, it is recommended to spread awareness of the problem in the country to make it more understandable for all social media services' users. Only in this way, it is possible to develop people's critical thinking to make them indifferent to the spread of misinformation and fake news. As was mentioned before, Facebook already works on the development of algorithms and other special methods to stop misinformation on the platform. It has not succeeded in this specific mission yet primarily because of the magnitude of the problem itself and the way the information is spread on the Internet. While it works on technical solutions, the mission of spreading awareness is the most relevant one. Facebook, therefore, should start by posting cautious messages and information on the specificities of misinformation on the platform. It should also obligate news reportage bloggers and influencers to switch on specific indications for possibly biased content. In such a way, people would see that a person was under the impression of something while writing the post, and, therefore, the platform users should be aware of subjectivity in their text. Ideally, such alerts should be controlled by Facebook editors themselves to prevent misinformation spread. The government, in turn, should organize more initiatives to inform the public. It could, for instance, arrange events dedicated to misinformation, on which reputable speakers would explain the specificities of the problem in detail. They could also provide people with efficient steps how critically evaluate information and remain true to their opinions themselves. The proposed initiatives and ones similar to them could help people adapt to living in the information society. They could help individuals critically evaluate every post they see, therefore, promoting their immunity to misinformation on the Internet.

5. Conclusion

The above discussions lead to the conclusion that the effects of misinformation are genuinely colossal. They influence people's minds on either conscious or subconscious levels, formulating public reactions to specific circumstances and events. Analysis of the issue's background showed that misinformation largely relates to unintentional behaviors that mislead inadvertently. It is especially harmful to information society, in which information is significant for economic, political, and cultural activity. The current issues on Facebook vividly represent these tendencies, indicating the need to develop an efficient multidimensional approach to overcome them. The application of the Two-Step Flow Theory of Communication and Agenda Setting Theory revealed that bloggers and influencers on social media have become more credible news informers for people than average news reportages. In the given circumstances, social media determines the social agenda. To address the effects of misinformation, either Facebook or the US government or the US population itself should equally contribute to promoting people's immunity to misinformation on the Internet. Only spreading awareness of the problem in the country could help individuals critically evaluate every post they see and remain true to their personal opinions and minds. As for the limitations of this paper, it lacks empirical studies in this field, which can be studied in the future.

References

- [1] In Advertising, P. (2019). *Agenda setting theory*. Retrieved May 14, 2022, from <https://www.communicationtheory.org/agenda-setting-theory>.
- [2] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press, <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001/oso-9780190923624>.
- [3] Brown, A. (2021). "Facebook Wants Us To Fix Its Misinformation Problem." *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2021/04/01/facebook-wants-us-to-fix-its-misinformation-problem/?sh=63a3d3ff4df2>.
- [4] Buchanan, T., & Benson, V. (2019). "Spreading Disinformation on Facebook: Do Trust in Message Source, Risk Propensity, or Personality Affect the Organic Reach of 'Fake News'?" *Social Media + Society* <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119888654>.
- [5] Chadwick, A., & Vaccari, C. (2019). "News sharing on U.K. social media: Misinformation, disinformation, and correction." Loughborough University https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/News_sharing_on_UK_social_media_misinformation_disinformation_and_correction/9471269.
- [6] Higgins, K. (2016). "Post-truth: A guide for the perplexed." *Nature News*, 540(7631), 9, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27905459>.
- [7] Madrigal, A. C. (2017). "What Facebook did to American democracy." *The Atlantic* <http://www.cs.yale.edu/homes/jf/MadrigalFeb2018-2.pdf>.
- [8] Misinformation. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2022, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/misinformation>.
- [9] Mosseri, A. (2017). "Working to Stop Misinformation and False News." *Meta*, <https://www.facebook.com/mediablog/working-to-stop-misinformation-and-false-news>.
- [10] Pickard, V. (2016). "Media failures in the age of Trump." *The Political Economy of Communication*, 4(2). <http://polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/viewFile/74/264>.
- [11] Preston, S., Anderson, A., Robertson D. J., Shephard, M. P. & Huhe, N. (2021). "Detecting fake news on Facebook: The role of emotional intelligence." *PLoS ONE* 16(3), e0246757, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0246757>.
- [12] Tsfati, Y., Boomgaarden, H. G., Strömbäck, J., Vliegenthart, R., Damstra, A. & Lindgren, E. (2020). "Causes and consequences of mainstream media dissemination of fake news: literature review and synthesis." *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 44, 2, 157-173 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23808985.2020.1759443>.

- [13] Weimann, G. (2015). "Two-Step Flow of Communication." In *"International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)"*, Elsevier,
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/two-step-flow-of-communication>.
- [14] Woolf, N. (2016). "How to solve Facebook's fake news problem: experts pitch their ideas." *The Guardian*,
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/facebook-fake-news-problem-experts-pitch-ideas-algorithms>.