

A series of articles on

A Social Media Danger
To Society

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A Social Media Danger to Society

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A Social Media Danger to Society

Report One: A New Breed of Journalist

This series of articles examines the social media vendors that are contributing to the undermining, falsifying, and distorting of information on the Internet. This information is being exchanged among millions of users throughout the world. These vendors usually do not create this information, but it flows through their systems.

Information in newspapers and other media may be of high quality (accurate) or low quality (inaccurate). Regarding my local paper, I've the opinion the *Coeur d'Alene Press* journalists write high quality material, although I may disagree with their opinions on issues. Because their columns are read by many people, they do not get a free pass on being inaccurate or deceitful. Some readers support their contentions, but others do not and can challenge the views of the Press, which appear frequently in the letters to the editor section of the paper.

Hard copy newspapers, magazines, and books are one-to-one models. A publisher, such as the Press, must send a copy to each person who pays for the publication. This model is very expensive to sustain, much less make a profit.

In the past, mass media output, especially newspapers, magazines, and books, were subject to the eyes of readers and other critics who kept a watch on their contents. Today, these information media still have some of this kind of review, but not as much as earlier times.

Why has this model changed? Because much of this printed material is now electronically digitized and therefore subject to the high speeds of modern computers and computer-based networks. Paper-based media have difficulty in "keeping up" with electronic competitors that operate at the speed of light, and---with one copy---can send millions of copies to users via the cyberworld's electronic broadcast capabilities.

Notwithstanding this capacity and speed, why should these technology improvements militate against the continued practice of publishing high quality news and other information? The answer is simple: These responsible information outlets are being overwhelmed by millions of people who need only a PC or smartphone and an account with an Internet or cellular service provider to become their own journalist, their own publisher.

This new breed of writer-publisher usually has no training in or experience with responsible journalism, but that person often makes up for this deficiency with a very large axe to grind.

It has become clear that a huge number of individuals in the world's societies do not care if the information they place on the Internet is of high quality. Their main concerns are: Does that information fit with that person's outlook on life? Does it mesh with the person's ideology? Can it gain recognition for the person?

As discussed in a later segment in this series, this situation is made more dangerous because the networking capability of the cyberworld allows a malcontent to form ties with other likeminded malcontents, which is resulting in a proliferation of misinformed, often angry groups of citizens.

Thus, the capabilities of the modern day cyberworld enable almost anyone, competent or not, knowledgeable or not, biased or not, to become their own source of information; to make their views known to millions of people by just owning a PC or smartphone and having an online account.

In our modern cyberworld, reviews for high quality content are difficult to achieve because of the volume of information and the speed in which it is created and transported to millions of people. Humans have always been challenged to evaluate the quality of information

they receive from others. The Internet and smart phones are making these assessments much more difficult.

Today, thousands of self-published blogs, websites, and podcasts are usually not subjected to any meaningful review for their quality. The amount of the traffic that would have to be reviewed---proof read, if you will---is staggering. For example, Facebook alone processes 50 trillion bytes (characters) a day. ...Equivalent to just over 1 billion copies of this article.

The age-old fantasy of “Everyone *wants* to be a writer,” is just that: antiquated and out-of-date. Today, with personally owned and privately operated websites, blogs, and podcasts, anyone---the knowledgeable as well as the ignorant---*can* be a writer, a journalist.

The result? We are increasingly receiving, via social media, information of very poor quality, much of it outright false. It undergoes little or no review for its accuracy. Because it arrives though the electronic, digital world---the cyberworld---far too many people think it has the quality of the traditional printed word of the newspaper, the “old fashioned” way of keeping us informed.

That old way is still proving to be the best approach, the most accurate practice, to keep American citizens abreast and cognizant of the goings-on in our society. But as we will see in this series, that way is under threat from many Internet-based social media users who have an axe to grind, who present their grievances with the misrepresentation of facts, often with falsehoods. Their ill-founded protests are preventing Americans from being properly informed.

A society composed of misinformed citizens is impossible to sustain. Sooner or later, it will crumble into a chaotic cacophony of ignorant conflict-ridden factions. Time and again, our history books record this recurring deadly human intramural.

A Social Media Danger to Society

Report Two: Lowering Standards for Trusted Information

In the first report of this series, I wrote, “In the past, mass media output, especially newspapers, magazines, and books, were subject to the eyes of readers and other critics who kept a watch on their contents. Today, these information media still have some of this kind of review, but not as much as earlier times.”

In a much more rigorous fashion, the same idea holds true for scientific papers and academic manuscripts, including journals. These writings have long been subject to a vital process called “peer review.” It involves the piece being thoroughly examined by experts in the field of the manuscript’s subject matter. This review occurs before the work is published.

The process is not infallible as the reviewer(s) may make mistakes. But the practice has resulted in a remarkable collection---billions of published technical documents---that are factually accurate.

The importance of this widely used procedure cannot be over-emphasized. Without it, shoddy, even self-serving information can be used to deceive the public. For bogus medical claims, ones that can result in riches flowing to their creators, it could result in unnecessary pain, even death. The falsities might very well result in defective medicines and flawed treatments.

During the past few years, this important human practice has come under assault. Our society has witnessed the proliferation of thousands of journals that do not meet the high standards of the publications many industries and millions of people have come to trust.

These shoddy, even deceptive compositions are usually published rapidly, as time is not taken for a high-quality peer review. Most of these works are not checked for plagiarism or the methods by which the material was created, such as the lab procedures used to come up with the “findings” of the work.

What is to be gained from participating in what can only be called a scam and a dangerous one at that? Reputable journals charge authors for publishing their work. In turn, many authors (say, research scientists) pay this fee from money they receive from grants and other donors.

The journals, hard copy and online, that participate in this rip-off are making millions of dollars for (likely) misinforming the public.

The creators of these works bear a great deal of the responsibility for this perilous practice. But after all, the “publish or perish” sword hangs over the heads of many of them. Plus, that enticing incentive called recognition.

How big is this industry? The *Scientific American* journal states, “8,000 predatory journals publish 420,000 papers every year, nearly a fifth of the scientific community’s annual output of 2.5 million papers.”

These figures do not include the massive proliferation of false information on the Internet. Of course, most of the predatory journals’ junk ends-up online, thereby giving it an aura of authenticity.

To gain a sense of how influential the Internet social media vendors can be in the presence of predatory journals, misinformed “journalists” and misled writers---approximately 1/3 of the US population---obtain their news from Facebook. In other parts of the world, Facebook news is consumed by 2/3 of the population. In addition, according to Jill Lepore, a reporter for *The New Yorker*, Facebook maintains personal information in its databases “of more than a

quarter of the world's people, 2.8 billion out of 7.9 billion, and governs the flow of information among them.”

Those statistics are impressive for a firm that is basically an advertising enterprise, one that collects information on its customers and sells advertisements based on its customers' data. Given Facebook's pervasive presence in many people's lives, how it goes about interacting with these people, how it treats these people, is of great importance.

The same holds true for the other companies that play a prominent role in social media, such as the so-called “Big Five” tech companies, Alphabet (formerly Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta (formerly Facebook, already mentioned), and Microsoft control much of the traffic in the Internet.

Later articles discuss ideas for addressing the predatory journal/predatory writer syndrome. The next article examines the manner in which cyberworld users (you and me) are being unconsciously roped into ideological corrals and marketing cages.

A Social Media Danger to Society Report Three: Changing an Opinion

An American pioneer living in the 18th century said, “Lord, grant that I may always be right, for thou knowest I am hard to turn.” That quote sums up much of this article.

The pioneer was describing himself as well as almost every human who walks this earth. His “hard to turn” phrase is known today as cognitive bias. It identifies a trait of human behavior in which people accept information coming from a person or group they know, but information from an unknown person or group is viewed with suspicion or rejected.

The term is also used to identify another human trait: People seek sources for information that confirm what they already believe. Even more, people more easily remember information that is in conformance with their viewpoints than information that is contrary to their beliefs.

You and I might be saying, “Not so, I am open-minded!” The evidence shows otherwise. A study published in *Scientific American* disclosed, “This tendency is extremely difficult to correct. Experiments consistently show that even when people encounter balanced information containing views from differing perspectives, they tend to find supporting evidence for what they already believe.”

I think all of us know that when people receive information counter to their own beliefs, they dig-in. They become even more committed to their established views on the subject. They become more doctrinaire, likely one reason for barroom brawls.

This behavior is being used by many Internet vendors for their own benefit but not ours. Many large-scale Internet vendors, such as Google and Facebook, rely on user sessions to gain knowledge of user browsing preferences. This invaluable pool of information is used by many of the major search engines to personalize what is displayed to a user based on the user’s history; that is, what the user’s preferences are.

As the *Scientific American Journal* makes clear, if Internet vendors are so inclined, “They [can] prioritize information in our feeds that we are most likely to agree with---no matter how fringe---and shield us from information that might change our minds.”

This activity means that users increasingly have their options narrowed. Their beliefs are reflected during a query. Sites to their “like” views are displayed first, say on the first page, of their PCs or smartphones, with less agreeable information shown further down in the feed, often on other pages.

Keep in mind that the priority of what is displayed has nothing to do with its quality. These cues to us, cues to influence what we shop for, who we vote for, etc. rarely have any relationship to the quality (accuracy) of the information.

An Internet user might not have an opinion about a subject. This neutral user, sitting on the fence, is a prime target for social media vendors to target, to move the user off the fence, to persuade the user to form an opinion about the subject. These “persuadables” become prime targets for tailored messages to be sent to them, to move them to a certain way of thinking.

The upshot of these manipulative strategies of many Internet and smartphone vendors is to reinforce our beliefs in order to sell us more products. Of more serious consequence, to sell us more political snake oil.

Bombarded with enough of that snake oil, the fence sitter will likely get off the fence. The 1700s American pioneer, if he had access to modern social media, might very well find he is not so “hard to turn.”

How so? By echo chambers, bots, memes, and spreading false but negative information, which are all designed to manipulate our behavior. The subject of the next article in this series.

A Social Media Danger to Society Report Four: Manipulating Behavior

The closed loop aspect of people being more accepting to views that are similar to their own than contrary ideas can lead to walled-off minds. Just like the 18th century pioneer who was not prone to considering any beliefs but his own.

Such a padlocked mind often results in echo chambers: The beliefs of a group, churned inside but not outside this group, are further amplified and reinforced. Because the information is cloistered from rebuttal, even criticism, most of us are prone to seek out information that reinforces our existing views. Without encountering opposing views, these mental echo chambers can increase social and political polarization and extremism. That is the conclusion of many people who study human behavior.

As for you and me? Of course not. Our loops of empathy and openness to opposing views are accepting and wide as can be. ... We can only wish this were so. Echo chambers are part of human nature.

Indeed, in America, the land of free expression and open communications, self-reinforcing, self-amplifying echo chambers exist. They have led to many closed groups. Some are quite vociferous in voice and violent in practice. Their presence in our country is growing.

Unfortunately, cognitive bias and echo chambers are not academic contrivances. They pose a threat to our traditional reliance on relatively high-quality information---information on which we should base much of our lives.

Memes have become an integral part of the Internet. Part of the information flow in the cyberworld takes the form of memes. A meme is usually a photo accompanied with text, but it can be a video, text alone, graphics, a link, a hashtag, etc. Popular memes can spread rapidly. Using Internet parlance, they can go *viral*.

Memes are effective because they take advantage of people being interested in or amused by the same subjects. Those subjects can be anything, such as jokes, political views, certain kinds of art, or a clever catch phrase. They require no skill to relay to others and only limited skill to create.

Bots have also become a significant part of the Internet. Bots are software programs designed to make users believe they are communicating with another human, when they are actually communicating with a software application. As of 2021, bots consumed at least 50 percent of all Internet traffic. Of these bots, about half are classified as “good” bots (carrying accurate content) and half are “bad” bots (carrying misleading content or outright lies).

If these statistics are correct, 25 percent of Internet traffic contains misleading or outright false information. How would you react if you turned on your morning news, or picked up your local newspaper, with the expectation that ¼ of the information was designed to misinform you?

Often, the bots present a user only with information that reinforces the user’s views, even if the information is of poor quality, even false. The user is often presented information that melds and reinforces the user’s own viewpoints, but the information may not be accurate.

The information stream might begin with modestly critical information designed to lure the user to continue surfing about the topic. The user might be neutral about a subject. “Hm, that’s interesting,” a user might think, “I’ll surf a bit more on the topic.”

Often, the user does not do any surfing at all. The social media vendor’s software takes over and the user is involuntarily subjected to a spate of memes designed to persuade the user to a desired way of thinking; that is, the vendor’s desired way of thinking. Remember that this

vendor is not only a company that markets a commercial product, it may be a vendor that markets a political, racial, or religious philosophy.

Of course, the user might be further along than curiosity. The user might be looking for reinforcement of the user's beliefs.

Whatever the case may be, once snared, the system lures the user with more enticing information, often more provocative. The goal of these kinds of memes and bots is to persuade users to embrace some belief, some product, some advertisement. Ideally, for the social media vendor, the user is corralled into accepting the messages (often in the form of memes) being sent to the user's screen.

In essence, they are designed to manipulate the user. ...Of course, you and I are impervious to cognitive bias, memes, and bots. Maybe so, but the person next to us is not.

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Report Five: Consequences of Social Media Meddling

Let's assume you hold conservative views on most issues. How often do you turn to MSNBC for your news? How often do you search for liberal-leaning websites to take in and evaluate their information? Let's now assume you hold liberal views on most issues. How often do you turn to FOX for your news? How often do you search for conservative-leaning websites to take in and evaluate their information?

Unless you are a rare exception, the answers to the four questions are: seldom or never, and usually never. We humans, as verified by research on cognitive bias, stay with what we believe and trust; with what makes us comfortable.

In the political world, the word "persuadable" identifies voters who have not made up their minds about a candidate. Through manipulating what they see on the PC or smartphone screens, they can be persuaded to get off the fence and form an opinion, to develop a belief in a candidate, to vote for a candidate.

The use of negative (even false) information, and flooding that information time and again with bots and memes is known to be an effective weapon in political campaigns. Furthermore, not many fence sitters, the persuadables, have to leave their fences to make a difference. A few can affect the outcome of a national election.

As an example of how powerful this technology can be, consider the 2020 US Presidential election. The margin of victory for both candidates (Trump and Biden) was narrow in many "swing" states; so-named because neither Republicans or Democrats held a clear voter advantage.

The closest margins of victory were these three states, in which the margin was under 1 percent. All these states were won by Biden, who captured 37 electoral votes:

Georgia, 0.23 percent (11,779 votes)---16 electoral votes
Arizona, 0.31percent (10,457 votes)---11 electoral votes
Wisconsin, 0.63 percent (20,682 votes)---10 electoral votes

The key to winning swing states is garnering the votes of the undecided voters, those on the fence: the persuadables. Don't bother with those people who are known to be Red or Blue. Ignore those folks. After all, gerrymandering has done the trick in those districts. Go after those who can be persuaded to go Red or Blue---depending on which party is targeting them, of course.

Bombard their voting precincts with blogs, websites, podcasts, video streams, media articles. Employ memes and bots, both based on artificial intelligence and massive amounts of information gleaned from monitoring user traffic.

Using these tools, perform an analysis of voters' psychological profiles. As seen in the three swing states of Georgia, Arizona, and Wisconsin, it only takes a tiny sliver of people in a swing precinct or a swing state to make the difference between victory and defeat of an entire election.

You and I, and the data from our Internet traffic are the fodder for the social media vendors and their political customers (such as political action committees (PACs)). We are the silage which they feed-on to win elections.

Should we be concerned that our emails and texts, our Facebook postings, our YouTube watching, our Amazon purchases, and our Google queries are being used to influence our shopping behavior? Our voting behavior? Or who becomes the nation's next president?

Should we care if we are quite often being fed inaccurate information, often outright lies that are not reviewed for quality? Should we care if the age-old practice of "peer review" is going away, as is accurate investigatory journalism?

If we believe the success of a democracy rests on an informed citizenry, we should care.