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### Disinformation in the Modern Age

As the internet continues to grow in influence and accessibility, the spread of Misinformation has become an increasingly pressing issue surrounding both media and democracy. Misinformation is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as “False or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong.” (misinformation-disinformation). To defend the principles of the First Amendment and ensure that the populace of the United States is in touch with the ever-evolving landscape of the internet, mandatory courses regarding the detection of misinformation should be implemented. These courses would aid in the fight against misinformation by teaching how information is harmful and would aim to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to avoid falling for false information without attempting to limit the freedom of the press.

To produce this solution for misinformation, it is important to prove that misinformation is a democratic problem that must urgently be solved. In an article posted by the National Library of Medicine (NLM) they express concern regarding the current state of news media, stating that “Without an accurately informed public, democracy cannot function.” (Adams, Osman, Bechlivanidis, and Meder). This quote expresses that if people are not involved in politics, and remain ill-informed, democracy will not work as intended. Democracy was founded on the expectation of a politically informed public. The increasing issue of misinformation is directly impacting the public’s perception of politics, as many people are unable to detect misinformation and untrustworthy sources, the expectation of a politically-informed public is crumbling, leading to a direct threat to the foundation of democracy. Though it is difficult to effectively measure the direct effects of misinformation, a study conducted by Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) was able to make a connection. Their study indicated that reporting on the 2016 election made people less trusting of news sources heavily tied to a political party (Adams, Osman, Bechlivanidis, and Meder). This is a direct threat to democracy and media as it showcases a growing distrust in major news outlets. This is a problem because distrust in media leads to an ill-informed public, as when an individual doesn’t trust the news they are receiving, they will not wish to consume said news. This leads to a weaker democracy, as democracy was founded on the individuals being able to form well-informed opinions on political happenings.

In a study conducted by Pew Research Center the issue of distrust growing in the media is not only evident, but a distrust in democracy as a whole. In a poll conducted from February

2019 to March of the same year, with over six thousand participants, the result showcased that “Two-thirds (67%) say that made-up news designed to mislead causes a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues, while 63% feel the same way about a video that is altered or made up. And by large majorities, 79% and 77% respectively, they favor restrictions on these kinds of content.” (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Walker and Fedeli). These numbers are staggering as they showcase just how dangerous misinformation is to the general public. When two-thirds of a nation’s populace is in the belief that misinformation is causing great confusion about issues and basic facts then there must be contingencies in place for this threat to be fought. Though not everybody agrees on who is responsible for the distribution of misinformation, there is a general consensus that it is an issue.

Another example of the threat of misinformation being of real concern is another study conducted by the Pew Research Center. This study polled American citizens and asked them if they would be in support of the government and tech companies restricting false information on social media. The results showed that in 2018, roughly 39% of individuals supported government interference, this number then rose in 2021 to 48%, then it rose again to 55% in 2023. Similarly in the same years, when asked about allowing tech companies to regulate misinformation the number rose from 56% to 59%, then to a whopping 65% (Aubin and Liedke). Examining this information further pushes the fact that misinformation is a threat to democracy. When individuals are pushing for restrictions on the freedom of the press, and in support of government intervention in freedom of the press, it shows just how pressing of an issue misinformation is to Americans and democracy. This also highlights a distrust in media outlets, deferring to their government to regulate the information they receive, rather than trusting those reporting on the nation’s happenings. This is also a threat to democracy as it shows that people are willing to give the government more power (in media regulation) to experience what they believe to be more trustworthy news. Showcasing desperation when faced with a challenge that seems nigh impossible to overcome without some form of intervention.

Though misinformation is a problem, government regulation of media outlets is not a palatable solution. Instead, the implementation of a mandatory course on media bias, misinformation, and identifying trustworthy sources should be included in schools for students and in mandatory, professional seminars for adults. The need for these information sessions and seminars is apparent in the way public schools manage the discussion surrounding misinformation, these discussion regarding misinformation is not long or intensive enough. Adults also need a refresher course as many older individuals outside of school were not allowed to receive these short discussions regarding misinformation as they were implemented too late. In a New York Times article regarding the relationship between misinformation and high school students “Ms. Gilligan, a recent Maynard High School graduate, found that 47 percent of students in her school district rarely talked to their parents and guardians about what made media sources trustworthy. Only 52 percent of seniors had been taught that media companies make

money by selling audience attention.” (Hsu). This quote is disheartening as it shows that outside of the classroom, many students must rely on their intuition when it comes to misinformation. It also shows that high schools aren’t doing enough to educate students on the workings of news outlets, not expressing that media outlets have the motivation to lie or spread inflammatory information to encourage readers to click on their websites. This shows that an expansive course must be made available and mandatory for people of all ages. This is evident late in the article where 3,446 high schools were tasked with evaluating the trustworthiness of articles, 97% of these students were tricked as they hadn’t noticed that a source about fossil fuel facts was tied to the fossil fuel industry (Hsu). This study showcases once again that these courses are a necessary implementation for students. And public schools should be mandated to devote resources to these courses to avoid their students being tricked outside of a controlled environment. In the same article, there is an alarming anecdote from a high school teacher, stating that “Others had said they were unvaccinated against COVID-19 because their parents had told them, inaccurately, that the shot would make them infertile.” when referring to the false statements shared by students when influenced by misinformation (Hsu). This quote shows that adults are not impervious to misinformation, and it shows that students are not the only ones who should be mandated to partake in these proposed mandatory courses and seminars.

An example of how these courses would be beneficial can be seen in an APA article surrounding the teaching of misinformation to undergraduate college students at Stanford. In his exercise he instructs students to search up the American College of Pediatricians before revealing that they are a hate group, the students see the .org domain name, the well-formatted website, and the other with a doctorate and they suspect nothing wrong. The professor then revealed that they had all fallen for misinformation from a disguised trustworthy source, revealing to the student’s surprise that they had been viewing the works of a well-disguised hate group. Stating that “The exercise is a real-life introduction to the idea that everyone, not just the naive or unsavvy, is vulnerable to disinformation. ‘Once a group of smart Stanford undergraduates sees how easily they are taken in, how easily they fall for this stuff, they suddenly perk up and realize they have something to learn,’ Wineburg said. ‘Nobody wants to be an easy mark.’” (Pappas). This exercise demonstrates how effective these courses can be in guiding individuals to think for themselves, allowing students to be tricked, and then explaining to them how they could learn about techniques and skills necessary to navigate a predatory media landscape. The only issue with this course is that it is a college course that is not mandatory. Meaning that those unable to take this course, will not have as much experience in being able to defend against this form of misinformation. He later expresses that less than 10% of students cross-reference sources they use to gather their information (Pappas). This is a major issue, and it also expresses the effectiveness of the course as it showcases how these courses aid in exposing flaws in how we traverse the internet, and once flaws are exposed they can be mended. Wineburg goes on to state “Schools don’t generally teach students how to conduct fact checks, although teens average 7 to 8 hours a day online (Common Sense Media, 2019). ‘Why

would we expect young people to know how to do something that they weren't taught to do?" (Pappas). This quote demonstrates clearly how these mandatory courses would benefit in the fight against misinformation. The best way to protect ill-informed people from discrete misinformation is to inform them. Giving people the tools they need to shield themselves from misinformation and showing them that it isn't just gullible or naive people falling for misinformation is paramount to defending democracy.

In an article discussing how students fall for misinformation, a high school teacher, Gardner, with 20 years of experience states that "Many schools do not focus on the issue. "Most high schools probably do some teaching to prevent plagiarism, but I think that's about it." and that the issue has had "a growing impact over the past 10 to 20 years"(Moyer). This anecdote from Gardner expresses an innate problem with the public school system and its failure to adapt to the evolving issue of misinformation. As the internet grows more accessible, and those accessing the internet are doing so at a younger age, it is ever-important to implement safeguards for defending against misleading information. With students as young as 14 being indoctrinated into conspiracy theories a 2016 Stanford study revealed that out of 8,000 students, 80% of middle schoolers believed a sponsored message to be a news story (Moyer). These students are not to be ridiculed for this mistake, the schools should be responsible for correctly informing these kids about the harmful potential of receiving news on the internet. With many middle schoolers walking around with phones, and no parental controls, it is easy to see how the spread of misinformation among impressionable students can quickly get out of hand. Moyer then ends the article detailing that a media literacy course would be a useful tool to be implemented to aid in giving individuals the ability to analyze sources for themselves, directly supporting the mandatory seminars and courses proposed earlier.

Though it is established that misinformation is affecting people on a remarkable scale, it is not feasible to expect intervention from a third party to limit the news received by the general public. To not set a bad precedent, and to maintain trust in the American people, it is of interest to instate mandated courses that aim to effectively teach the populace about media literacy tools, development of critical thinking skills, and detection of media bias to not step on the toes of citizen's rights. Though it is clear that the current state of public schooling is not doing enough to combat incorrect information from being believed by those attending these institutions, with these mandated courses there is hope for a well-informed future.

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