**Social media, Democracy, and Market Failures**

*[Public goods] pose a problem for political philosophy if, following Rawls, we think of political society as a ‘cooperative venture for mutual advantage’ (Rawls, 1971: 4). Voluntary exchange is a key source of mutual advantage, but when the costs of producing a collective good are borne by individuals, while the benefits are dispersed, mutual gains may require government action* (Jonathan Anomaly, “Public Goods and Government Action”, p. 110)*.*

*A society that generates an ever more potent technological arsenal and, in the name of democratic consumerism, makes its elements available in ever larger numbers to a growing citizenry whose members believe they have inviolable rights to make, access, and use those items in…technologically maximalist ways, risks…impairment of its quality of life* (Robert McGinn “Technology, Demography, and The Anachronism of Traditional Rights, p. 177).

**Instructions**: Read through this whole document, and then answer each of the **bolded** **numbered** questions below. There is no word limit for responses, but, in general, you should be able to answer each question in ~150 – 200 words. You are welcome to divide responsibility for the questions among your group members, but the best answers will be shaped by collaborative writing and discussion. However, **each group member will be assigned primary responsibility for one question, and your grade on the assignment will be based on the quality of your answer to the question you are assigned**.

**Due date**: Wednesday, 4/1 at 11:59 pm.

**Background**: Political information is increasingly tailored to the reader’s interests. Approximately 45% of Americans get at least some of their news from Facebook, much of which is posted by like-minded Facebook Friends or promoted by Facebook based on your history of “likes”, Fb Friends, etc.[1] Moreover, some of the “news” stories circulated among social networks are patently false. During and after the 2016 presidential election, the circulation of so-called fake news and Russian-bought political ads on social media came under public scrutiny.

**Read the following passage from the assigned Washington Post article**:

*Facebook has said Russia’s efforts to influence the election involved 470 accounts and pages that spent more than $100,000 on 3,000 ads that reached 10 millions users. But outside researchers have said for weeks that free posts almost certainly reached much larger audiences — a point that Facebook will concede in its testimony on Tuesday.*

*Facebook’s general counsel, Colin Stretch, plans to tell the Senate Judiciary Committee that between 2015 and 2017, a single Russian operation in St. Petersburg generated about 80,000 posts and that roughly 29 million people potentially saw that content in their news feeds.*

*Because those posts were also liked, shared and commented on by Facebook users, the company estimates that as many as 126 million people may have seen material in their news feeds that originated from Russian operatives, which was crafted to mimic American commentary on politics and social matters such as immigration, African American activism and the rising prominence of Muslims in the United States…*

*Some Facebook employees also expressed regret that it had removed human editors from the “trending topics” feature seen in the news feeds of users after allegations surfaced several months before the November election about supposed liberal bias in how stories were selected and portrayed. Company officials, reluctant to be seen as favoring one part of the political spectrum, bowed to demands from conservatives for changes…*

*The potential for gaming Facebook’s algorithm with limited human oversight soon became clear, as demonstrably false news reports spread with increasing speed during the election. The company’s security team identified scores of sites that had spread phony news reports — such as one about Pope Francis supposedly endorsing President Trump — during the campaign. But a December blog post said the company intended to focus only on blocking the “worst of the worst.”—*Timburg and Dwoskin, WashPo

Meanwhile, Americans are further apart ideologically than they have been since at least 1994. According to Pew Surveys, the percentage of Republicans and Democrats expressing antipathy for the other party has more than doubled since 1994.[2]

**Political rationality:** requires that voters inform their decisions about how to vote using accurate beliefs formed on the basis of the best evidence available to them.

**1.** What is the value of political rationality in a democracy? Does political *ir*rationality cause harm? If so, how?

In a democracy, to keep things in check and balanced, political rationality plays a significant role in ensuring citizens understand the processes that are taking place. Political rationality represents multiple values in democracy; one of the essential values of political rationality is the ability to make a well-informed decision when choosing representatives and making fair laws and policies. It allows citizens and lawmakers to have the inclination to analyze all the information at one’s disposal and even consider different political views, allowing for effective decision-making. Democracy is representative of the inclusion of all voices and ideas, and political rationality is an essential point to that, wherewith it is rational thinking of considering all data fulfills the crucial points.

Regarding democracy, political irrationality is detrimental in that aspect, ensuing more issues for society. Political rationality shapes views and decisions based on logic and facts, whereas political irrationality does the opposite, basing decisions and ideology on emotion, deception, false information, and flawed thinking. Fake news is one of those factors which can lead to political irrationality as through the dissemination of false information, rational and effective political decisions can not be made (Buchanan). Thereby having policies and decisions to be made with flawed decision-making causing discrimination for unfortunate populations or discontent of the general populace. Another consequence of political irrationality is the loss of trust between the government and its constituents; where when political decisions are made without consideration of the people, it can lead to general dissatisfaction with democracy, which can lead to problems like polarization.

**2.** How could (a) politically motivated Russian advertisements and (b) the dissemination of “fake news” and (c) the gamification of communication combine to threaten political rationality?

Politically motivated Russian advertisements can threaten political rationality due to what it is trying to accomplish. These Russian “advertisements' ' that were used for the 2016 presidential election were well immersed and seen by the entire U.S population. So many people viewing these advertisements can subtly change the duration of the whole election. It is believed that “as many as 126 million people may have seen material in their news feeds that originated from Russian operatives (Timburg and Dwoskin).” Having advertisements and expressing your views is not politically irrational in itself, it is when there is a large amount of fake news and disinformation. Fake news causes there to be a large amount of disinformation spewing throughout millions and millions of people. Disinformation can cause societies to be at risk with its security and create challenges for them to overcome. The disinformation that derives from fake news combines with the gamification of communication which is technological ways to share and disperse that information to others. All of these factors together threaten political rationality because it prohibits the political system from being fair and just.

**Background**:Politically motivated advertising and fake news spreads via the same basic mechanisms that advertisers use to market products. Read the following excerpt from the assigned Chicago Tribune article, which describes a recent study on the dissemination of fake news.

*Thanks to the wealth of information available on social media and the advent of targeted advertising, [those wishing to spread false new reports] can go straight for the most susceptible and valuable victims — those most likely to spread the infection…*

*[T]he most important catalyst of fake news was the precision with which the purveyor targeted an audience — a task that can easily be accomplished using the data that tech companies routinely gather and sell to advertisers. The key was to seed an initial cluster of believers, who would share or comment on the item, recommending it to others through Twitter or Facebook. False stories spread farther when they were initially* ***aimed at poorly informed people who had a hard time telling if a claim was true or false****.*

*When marketers use information on surfing habits, opinions and social connections to aim ads at people with just the right interests, this can facilitate beneficial economic exchange. But in the wrong hands, the technology becomes a means for the precision seeding of propaganda.—Buchanan, Chicago Tribune*

**3.** How can we explain the moral problems with fake news in terms of the features of a noxious market identified by Pham and Castro? (Remember, they say that noxious markets produce both individual and societal harms and that noxious markets exploit and n weakened cognitive agency).

The moral problems with fake news by the three main features of a noxious market, which are discussed below:

**Individual and society is harmed** by spreading false information that can lead to harmful actions or beliefs. For example, fake news about COVID-19 can cause people to engage in behaviors that increase the risk of infection or to avoid getting vaccinated, leading to more illness and death. Fake news about elections can undermine trust in democratic institutions, leading to social unrest and even violence. In this way, fake news can cause harm to both individuals and society as a whole (Pham, Castro 3).

Fake news often **exploits cognitive vulnerabilities**, such as confirmation bias or the tendency to accept information that confirms pre-existing beliefs (Pham, Castro 8). Fake news can also take advantage of the fact that people are more likely to believe information that comes from sources they perceive as trustworthy or authoritative, even if those sources are not actually reliable. By exploiting these cognitive vulnerabilities, fake news can spread quickly and have a powerful impact on people's beliefs and actions.

**Engendering weakened cognitive agency** is likely one of the biggest dilemmas with fake news, making it difficult for people to distinguish between true and false information. When people are repeatedly exposed to fake news, they may begin to doubt their ability to discern the truth and become more susceptible to manipulation (Pham, Castro 7). This can lead to a loss of agency, as people may feel that they are unable to make informed decisions based on reliable information.

In summary, all of the features of a noxious market can contribute to a harmful and destabilizing impact on society.

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**4.** What are some ways that either the government or private individuals might attempt to protect the good of political rationality against threats posed by false news stories spread by social media? Are there any ethical downsides to protecting political rationality from fake news? (Annabella)

Some of the ways that the government or private individuals might protect against threats posed by false news stories would be through increased transparency for all users. This can include means where information is enclosed with sources on the topic in the form of a mini citation. WhatsApp has a transparency feature meant to increase transparency; while users are not forced to cite where they get their information, mass-forwarded texts are tagged as such, as it is these types of messages that tend to spread misinformation. Further exploring the citation route, Twitter also has a similar feature for increasing transparency in posts, where users can report a tweet as being misleading or untrue, and provide sources to prove as thus. A banner then appears over the tweet, warning those who interact with it of its origins. This feature can be applied to other social media platforms, where users who do not want to cite sources must mandatorily tag their posts as opinion or risk being reported in the case of misleading information. In both of these scenarios, these actions were taken by private individuals on their “private” (i.e. not owned by the government) developments. They also give more “power to the people,” as the power of the masses enables these misleading posts to be identified. However, there are ethical ramifications to this. For instance, what constitutes fake news? Who determined this? The same way the masses can identify misleading posts, so can they proclaim a false message as true. Perhaps rallied together by an influential figure, users can overwhelm those who are tagging a post as fake news, exaggerating the problem you’re trying to solve since users are now more inclined to trust anything not tagged as fake to be true, given that they know safety measures are in place. Additionally, and perhaps the most obvious ethical downside, is the cost of free speech. If you prevent users from speaking their mind, even if it is opinion or untrue, you are still infringing upon their First Amendment right. It is a fine line to determine who can say what.

[1] http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/

[2] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/7-things-to-know-about-polarization-in-america/