Assignment 1

GOING VIRAL – PART I

The two articles, “How Facebook’s Fake News Fix Made the Alfie Evans Story Go Viral” and “How Facebook Groups Made Alfie Evans the Biggest Story on The Internet”, presents the viral ethical battle concerning the life of Alfie Evans, a terminally ill 23-month-old toddler. At 6 months, Alfie was admitted to Alder Hey Hospital. For several months, Alfie’s parents clashed with health officials and the British justice system over discontinuing Alfie’s treatment, especially during its final stages. The doctors felt that continuing Alfie’s life support would not be the best choice as his health was deteriorating. Ultimately, England’s High Court and Supreme Court denied the permission to transfer Alfie to Bambino Gesu hospital situated in Rome. Alfie’s life support was withdrawn on April 23, 2018 and passed away 5 days after.

With the help from Facebook and other platforms, Alfie’s parents established an online campaign group called ‘Alfie’s Army’, aiming to stop the withdrawal of life support. This case attracted the attention of the public as well as the media in the UK and other nations. Facebook altered its algorithm which would promote posts from the user’s friends and family. On the platform, the campaign group had over 600,000 followers, where members would give their support for the Evans’ family. Thousands of people supported the family by sharing and commenting on posts, signing petitions, protesting outside the hospital, and donating money. This helped Evans’ case to grab the attention of people like Pope Francis.

However, social media included problems. The level of influence from ‘Alfie’s Army’ campaign group led to Facebook altering their algorithm to promote posts from a user’s community. Misinformation, propaganda, and radicalization were being spread throughout social media platforms. Supporters resorted to hate against Alder Hey Hospital by verbally harassing the hospital staff and attempting to storm into the entrance. After several months of online campaigning, the Evans’ family had to persuade their followers to wind down so that the family can move forward. Based on the social media involvement during Alfie’s case, it displays how beneficial and detrimental of a role it can play for the public.

D.1. What do you consider some of the positive effects of the viral social media involvement in the Alfie Evans case?

There were a few positive effects that came out of the involvement of social media. First, Alfie’s case was able to grab attention that was needed from the public. In this case, social media helped the Evans’ family realize that they were not alone in this fight. Alfie’s case is one prominent example of how vital social media can be when someone is in dire need of help. Another positive effect is that social media helped spread awareness about the issues and faults that exist within the legal and medical system. In the eyes of the public, the higher authorities are at fault for not allowing Alfie Evans to go to Rome; awareness can eventually lead to opportunities for change for these systems. Additionally, I believe this case brought more awareness to the rare disease that Alfie was diagnosed with.

D.2. What do you consider some of the negative effects of the viral social media involvement in the Alfie Evans case?

While the involvement of social media helped the Evans’ family, it was also stressful. One negative effect of social media involvement was the spread of false information. For example, “…the hospital had prepared a lethal injection for the child or were keeping him in intensive care as part of a plan to harvest his organs”(Reynolds). Rumors like these creates lots of anxiety and stress for the followers as well as the rest of the public. The protest is another negative effect. The protestors stopped an ambulance from coming, attempted to storm into the hospital entrance, verbally harassed the hospital workers, and added fear for other patients. Most likely, this would not have been if it weren’t for the Facebook group, despite the intentions of the group being good.

D.3. The Facebook news-feed algorithm tweak is being credited (blamed?) for the Alfie Evans case going so viral. Do you think Facebook could have anticipated this effect?

Personally, Facebook should have anticipated this kind of effect. It is understandable that Facebook altered the algorithm to make the Alfie Evans case go viral, but it is also bound to have consequences. Instead of legitimate news sources, people would eventually come across fake news and share those news with their friends and family members and share the same news to others.

D.4. Do you have any thoughts on how this might have been handled differently? [ no right or wrong answers here, I just want to hear your thoughts ]

The purpose of the ‘Alfie’s Army’ on Facebook was to raise awareness about Alfie Evans and fight against the withdrawal of life support. I feel like if there was anything that could have been handled differently is monitoring the group as well as any post related to Alfie outside the group from the beginning. The online campaign group wasn’t monitored enough until the police stepped in after supporters tried to storm in the hospital. Besides that, I do not think this could be handled in any other way.

GOING VIRAL – PART II:

E.1. Mary Jo Laupp has been nicknamed the "TikTok Grandma", In your own words, describe her role in the TikTok/K-Pop fan response to the Tulsa rally.

As the ‘Tiktok Grandma’, Jo Laupp inspired the idea of booking tickets to Trump’s Tulsa rally and not attending the rally as a form of a prank. The TikTok video reached over 2 million views around June 2020. As a result, less than 6,500 supporters actually attended the rally.

The article states:

'As the story spread throughout social media, it became slightly twisted — like a message at the end of a game of telephone. The common refrain shifted from “TikTokers and K-pop fans lead Trump to overestimate his crowd” to “TikTokers and K-pop fans are the reason fewer than 6,200 people showed up to the event.” The former assertion is almost certainly true to some degree, but the latter is not only unlikely but probably false.'

E.2. In your own words, explain why the author feels that the first part -- “TikTokers and K-pop fans lead Trump to overestimate his crowd” -- is true to some degree.

The author feels that way because according to Brad Parscale, the Trump Administration received over a million ‘requests’ to attend the rally. The majority of those bookings came from TikTokers and K-pop fans, and the intention was to get a ticket and not attend. This led to the Trump Administration assuming that this rally was going to be very successful.

E.3. In your own words, explain why the author feels that the second part -- “TikTokers and K-pop fans are the reason fewer than 6,200 people showed up to the event.” -- is probably false.

While it is true that Tiktok fans gave the assumption that the Tulsa rally was expecting a huge audience, it is doubtful that they are the sole reason behind the low number of supporters. According to Joe Scarborough in the article, “People didn’t attend the rally because people decided not to attend the rally. It had nothing to do with TikTok kids or HR Pufnstuf shenanigans.” This tweet explains that it is rather the fault of the Trump Administration for having high expectations based on RSVPs. Just because lots of people signed up through RSVP doesn’t mean that they will attend, and the blame is on Trump Administration for not convincing enough people to attend. In the article, Daniel Radosh compared these sign-ups to Likes for Facebook events.

E.4. In your own words, describe two other explanations that the author puts forth for why so few of the "expected" attendees showed up.

The author believes that few attendees showed up because there was not a lot of commitment and interest from Trump’s supporters. Moreover, the campaign did not do enough to convince people to go to the rally. Another thing to mention is that this was the first rally since the pandemic started. It was evident that the number of attendees would decline since people were taking precautions such as avoiding large groups.