How Do People Vet The Information They Receive ? (Literature Review)

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News or information sharing is an activity that is performed on an everyday basis. Throughout the entire world, there are a number of information sharing networks that serve to spread information, or potentially misinformation, to members in their communities. With information sharing comes communication of said information. Communication is a major component of what allows groups to survive in their society. It allows them to learn more about their own communities and those that govern them(Carlson 9). With the advent of social media, this process is even better facilitated. Social media permits its users to search and consume political information posted by users that obtain their views from other networks (Johnson). This type of information can provide people with the options to accept these new perspectives, reinforce existing values, or ignore the information altogether (Johnson). A major question surrounding this project is how people make these decisions. The objective is to understand how people trust certain information that they receive and how this varies in a number of different communities and perspectives.

One of the ways in which information is trusted or vetted by others is through socially transmitted information. This can occur especially through the use of social media as it’s a term that describes information communicated by others in online and face to face conversations (Carlson 9). This is explained in “Through the Grapevine” where Taylor Carlson recounts events in recent American history where the release of misinformation can lead to its further amplification. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, USA-Today had released a tweet saying that “The United States, the only country to record anywhere near 1 million cases of the coronavirus, has reached another somber milestone”, immediately following this statement with a graphic depiction of deaths caused by COVID-19. Despite the information being accurate, it was also met with many replies by users who viewed the situation in a different light. One of the users replied to the tweet saying that, proportionally, one million is less than one percent of the population and that the U.S had more accurate numbers due to testing a higher percentage of their population compared to other highly populated countries such as India and China (Carlson 11). As a result of this socially transmitted information posted by this user, the information begins to paint a different picture, in which the virus is being downplayed or called a “hoax”. Even in the face of curated information, this example demonstrates how someone can create a narrative to fit their deeply opinionated mind. As a result, there will also be others that seek out to bolster their trust in their existing opinions by aligning with those that share their beliefs. All of this is caused by what Carlson describes as a “distorted democracy”.

Chapter one of “Through the Grapevine”, “How Political Conversations Change the Information Environment” lays down the potential effects that arise as a result of the trickling down of information from media professionals to versions delivered to common people by word-of-mouth. She argues that learning through this “grapevine” creates a distorted democracy which is marked by “an under informed, polarized, but engaged public, driven by changes to the information environment created by members of the public(Carlson 12). The distortion of information typically occurs during “social transmission”, where the information becomes distorted with the bias of the information holder. This all stems from a concept Carlson referenced called the “two-step flow”, where the actively informed share information to the casually informed. In accordance with their names, the actively informed seek out more political media and are more engaged than the casually informed. However, it’s important to mention that the actively informed does not simply recount the information that they have consumed to the casual. According to Carlson, the actively informed “packages” this information in a way that fits their political views, therefore creating a funnel of distorted information to be spread from person to person. Word-to-mouth is a very powerful tool for enabling distorted democracy as it is often given from whom the recipient would describe as a trusted individual. According to Carlson, nearly 35 percent of those who are labeled as casually informed report getting information from family “most of the time”, on the other hand, 5 percent report getting information from strangers(Carlson). Given some of the survey results, socially transmitted information is the driver of this distorted democracy. However, it is difficult to measure the extent to which information is being transmitted through word-to-mouth. Even though data is present that displays its effect, discovering the type of diction, tone, and overall presentation of the information from person to person would require a much more legitimate, word-for-word account of these dynamics.

Outside of common word-of-mouth deliverances of information is the transfer of information that occurs through social media and the online world. In “Marginalizing the Mainstream: How Social Media Privilege Political Information”, Richard Rogers grapples with the level of uncertainty online, questioning how problematic information manifests itself in online social media platforms. In order to determine the role that social media plays, Rogers analyzes the misinformation problem leading up to the 2020 election in a multi-platform perspective. According to Rogers, information can be marginalized in several different ways depending on the type of social media platform. For example, Roger states that the popular media platform TikTok parodies mainstream media whereas platforms such as 4chan and Reddit would “dismiss it and direct users to alternative influencer networks and extreme YouTube content”(Rogers). Furthermore, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook tend to point to hyperpartisan or “Fake News” sources”. Finally, instagram appeared to contain the most earnest content in relation to the election, which was primarily shared by influencers instead of experts(Rogers). Rogers claims that all of this creates an echo chamber that prevents users from accessing “accurate, nuanced perspectives”(Rogers). These examples highlight the reinforcement in bias that is present in these social media platforms as prejudiced individuals typically prefer news that reinforce their values and avoid those that challenge them (Arendt). Rogers found that TikTok users strived to use Trump and Biden hashtags to maximize views and engagement, straying from commitment to a position. However, in videos that proved to show commitment(to a candidate), we observe more sarcastic videos(lacking substance) targeting the common pitfalls of each candidate. This mostly comes in the form of videos targeting Biden’s age or those that brand Trump supporters as racist and misogynist (Rogers). Regardless of the validity of claims made by users, the format of videos and content on platforms like TikTok are bound to marginalize mainstream media information. This process works similarly to the distorted democracy except that creators on TikTok are incentivized to create engaging content by catering to supporters that align with their views. In order to facilitate this process, it’s easier to take information from mainstream media and transform it in a way that will be easily digestible for audience members that enjoy this form of content. Fortunately for these creators, TikTok is the perfect place to achieve this.

Varying media forms also demonstrate a capacity to influence the thoughts and belief systems of different communities, nationalities, and other affiliations. A study from the University of Akron titled “Media Consumption, Perceptions of Crime Risk and Fear of Crime: Examining Race/Ethnic Differences” compares different media types and analyzes their effect on different races' perception or fear of crime. Callanan mentions how previous studies on the effect of media influencing one’s perception of reality normally focus on the effect on one’s fear of crime. However, these studies would focus on groups such as “victims and non-victims”, “residents of high-crime areas and those of low-crime areas”, “men and women”, and much more (Callanan 94). Thus Callanan measured the fear of crime present in White, Latino, and Black people while also measuring an “intervening variable” which was the “Likelihood of Neighborhood Crime Risk. Additional factors were considered such as household income, education, and a scale measuring the frequency of them being a victim of a crime. The results revealed that television news and crime-based reality shows have more impact on both perception of neighborhood crime and fear of crime than do newspapers or crime dramas (Callanan 107). In the topic of race, even though the results were equivalent regarding fear of crime and consumption of local television news, Callanan doesn’t shy from the different “cognitive processing”. Where for example, a white viewer may substitute themselves as a victim, fearing the possibility of the event happening to them. Whereas a black viewer who lives in a high percentage black neighborhood would feel more “resonance”, knowing that the depictions of crime on tv match with their reality. This is largely, in part, due to the fact that non-whites in this study are more likely to live in poorer communities with higher rates of crime due to having a lower average income (Callanan 106). Callanan’s research is pivotal as it allows for readers to understand how different forms of media speak to audiences of varying backgrounds in the United States. Not only does it focus on what the media transmits to its viewers, but how the viewers’ environment and circumstances affect their interpretation of the events. This underscores the intersectionality of identity that is considered in the trusting and vetting of information. Although these results are promising, it does however lack a potential view of how other Races perceive each other as a result of consuming these different forms of media.

Including groups like race, it can be observed that the development of social groups and social categorizations leads to higher levels of distrust and more bias towards outgroups. Social identity theory derives from the premise “that human beings are, by nature, a pattern recognition species and that the human ability to distinguish between objects, circumstances, and behavior is a functional cognitive process necessary for survival”(Cuhadar and Bayton). In accordance with this theory is the establishment of in-groups and out-groups that are created by members of a specific community. In-groups are usually formed surrounding common identities shared within the group whereas outgroups are groups who share an identity that differs from the ingroups(Cuhadar and Bayton). There are major barriers that come to creation during in-group and outgroup dynamics. One of the psychological barriers that Kramer describes to be of influence in intergroup conflicts is the response to different types of behavior or strategy with one’s own judgment. For instance, Kramer references an anecdote from World War 2 when the Japanese had planned to attack Pearl Harbor. During the time, an informant for the United States was sure that the Japanese were not planning to attack because there were groups of sailors that were walking around Tokyo. However, it was later revealed that the sailors were part of the Japanese military and were a ploy to distract watchers while the army had prepared its attack on Pearl Harbor(Kramer). The in-group, Japan, in this situation was able to outsmart the United States due to the United States’ high level of distrust of Japan. Inversely, we can say that the level of trust that is present in the Japanese army allowed the forces to create a plan that only they would be able to understand in order to outwit the United States. However, what is most important to acknowledge is the trust that the United States army held with the informant. Since the informant belongs to the in-group, his word regarding out-group activities are unquestionably vetted. This relates to the idea of how in-group members are very likely to behave with preference within their group in order to protect their self esteem and achieve a “positive and distinct social identity”(Ramiah). If United States soldiers had questioned the informant’s judgment, it would mean potentially questioning his loyalty to the country. Instead, the soldiers would prefer to trust a member of their in-group instead of clashing with them, maintaining their self esteem as a member of the in-group.

All in all, information can inhabit a number of forms to create trust within communities and different groups. At the time of research, it appears that there is not a sufficient amount of literature available supporting the specific ways in which information is generally trusted in continents outside of North America. It would be plausible to analyze different international ongoing conflicts and the behavior of different ethnic groups across many states, however, this would also be limiting in its failure to generalize ways in which this is done in these continents. Although there isn’t a focus on specific topics, Jiang and Zhang have found that education and perceptions of government corruption affect the level of political trust in Asia(Jiang and Zhang). Furthermore, in the context of intergroup conflict and trust, the British Journal of Political Science published a paper that concluded that ethnic diversity is positively related to ethnocentric trust across countries but negatively related to ethnocentric trust within countries(Robinson). These findings can potentially be leveraged in data analysis that involve insights from Africa and Asia.

Appendix

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