Misinformation, AI and Conspiracy Theories

PCI Webinars | Carrie Rogers-Whitehead
Hello!

My name is Carrie Rogers-Whitehead and I’m excited to present with you today. You can reach me at rogerswhitehead@gmail.com
What we will cover

- Algorithms
- AI and Misinformation
- The WHYs of Conspiracy Theorists
  - Common Heuristics
- The Digital Economy and Misinformation
- Potential Solutions and Resources
- Q&A
1. ALGORITHMS
“Our online worlds need to be designed to be more like public parks and libraries, and not like shopping malls and roller derbies.”

Leslie Stebbins, Building Back Truth in an Age of Misinformation
BIAS IN ALGORITHMS

- Algorithms learn from associations between common words, the same way as humans. These associations can lead to stereotypes, generalizations and even harm. Humans, on the other hand are more aware of their biases.
- Algorithms reinforce stronger feelings. This means negativity and bias often flows to the top of feeds.
- Algorithms have secretive and protected content and are not subject to regulation and checks and balances.
OTHER CONCERNS WITH ALGORITHMS

- Algorithms can dig deeper into preferences than other forms of marketing. Beyond demographics they can look at hobbies etc.
- Decline of professional journalism:
  - Google and Facebook are the largest funders of journalism in the world. They “support” news by native ads and favoring sources.
  - “Ghost newspapers” are newspapers bought by others but the news is listed under the same name (i.e. Denver Post, Washington Post)
- The algorithms running AI Large Language Models (ChatGPT, Bard) are growing and even more opaque than search engine algorithms.
2. AI & MISINFORMATION
AI can reinforce racial, cultural and gender stereotypes. Also, different AI software can bring different responses.

From: https://huggingface.co/spaces/society-ethics/DiffusionBiasExplorer
SPAM IS BECOMING MORE SOPHISTICATED WITH GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI can also help spammers:

• Create fake invoices
• Catfish/Mimic real people on chatbots
• Break up other’s content (i.e. YouTube) and spam hundreds of short, low-quality videos/articles

Mailbox Delivery Report

Dear carrie:

• Six (6) incoming messages have failed to deliver to your mailbox - carrie@respon
• These messages will be automatically deleted in 24 hours if no action is taken to RESTORE these messages.
• Please visit the secure Microsoft Office portal through the button below to restore your messages.

Important: Microsoft will not be held accountable for the loss of important/sensitive data from your mailbox.

This email was sent from an unmonitored mailbox. You are receiving this email because you have subscribed to Microsoft Office 365.
Privacy Statement
Microsoft Corporation, One Microsoft Way, Redmond, WA 98052 USA
AI VIDEO GENERATORS USED FOR MISINFORMATION

- Sites like Synthesia can create automatic videos. They use AI avatars, who can speak a variety of different things in multiple languages. These, like other AI tools, can be used for nefarious purposes.

- Recently, a New York Times investigation found that the Chinese Communist Party was using Synthesia, to create a fake propaganda newscast.
Sites like WormGPT and FraudGPT are created from the code with OpenAI.

They can help gather information from potential targets easier.

They can write malware and improve phishing campaigns.
3. THE WHYS OF CONSPIRACY THEORISTS
“The problem is that when we encounter opposing views in the age of social media, it’s not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone. It’s like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our communities...we bond with our team by yelling at the fans of the other one.”

- Zeynep Tufekci
Users are more likely to respond to misinformation in the comments to a post than the factual information in the actual post.

Cayenne pepper, honey used to treat wounds of vlogger Ruby Franke's children, documents say

A study published recently in Nature tracked thousands of users interacting with false information. Only 16% called it accurate.

But when asked if they would share the headline, 51% said they would.

“Most people do not want to spread misinformation...but the social media context focuses their attention on factors other than truth and accuracy.”
POE’S LAW

The adage, originating on a message board in 2006, that nothing online can be viewed as satire/parody/joke unless there’s some kind of emoji/text to indicate it.

Sometimes you just don’t know if someone really truly believes a conspiracy theory.
3.5 COMMON HEURISTICS
Fluency Heuristic: If it’s simple and familiar it’s true.

i.e. We only use 10% of our Brain
Availability Heuristic: If I see it all around me, it must be everywhere.
  i.e. “I keep hearing about voter fraud, it must be rampant!”
Affect Heuristic: I feel strongly about it. It must be true.
i.e. Listening to a charismatic YouTuber.
3 REASONS PEOPLE BELIEVE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

1. Finding a casual explanation of events
2. To feel safe and secure in their environment
3. To fit in a group
Start with Curiosity. The library can be a great place to redirect that desire for inclusion and knowledge.
4. THE DIGITAL ECONOMY & MISINFORMATION
Algorithms prioritize popularity and emotions over substance, boosting conspiracy peddlers online.
THERE IS MONEY BEHIND GAMING THE ALGORITHM OVER A QUARTER OF PEOPLE SIMPLY CLICK ON THE FIRST RESULT OF GOOGLE.
"PODCASTING OFFERS A CRITICAL AVENUE THROUGH WHICH UNSUBSTANTIATED AND FALSE CLAIMS PROLIFERATE."

--Brookings Institute Report, 2/2023
A SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE AND PLACES SPREAD THE MOST MISINFORMATION

• Steve Bannon’s War Room podcast was found the top misinformation spreader in podcasts with about 20% of the episodes containing “false, misleading or unsubstantiated claims.” Podcasters do not have the same level of financial disclosure as in radio or social media. Popular podcasting apps require some compliance but that doesn’t necessary mean the influencer has to comply.

• The 15% most habitual Facebook users were responsible for 37% of false headlines shared in a recent study.
WHERE DO CONSPIRACY THEORISTS GET THEIR MONEY

**Store sales**
This is where most of Alex Jones of InfoWars makes their money. This can be merchandise, sponsored products and more.

**Digital advertising**
Digital advertising exchanges where companies bid for eyes and attention sometimes means mainstream brands, Walmart, Disney etc. can inadvertently be advertising on sites full of misinformation.

**Events**
Conspiracy theorists get speaking engagements or host their own conferences. For example, Mike Flynn hosted the WeCANAct Liberty conference and Robert F. Kennedy regularly is paid to speak at anti-vaccination events.
5. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS & RESOURCES
Beliefs are hard to change. Better to focus on prevention than correction.
“Equipping people with media literacy skills will not decrease the amount of misinformation online.”
—Leslie Stebbins, Building Back Truth in an Age of Misinformation

Media Literacy is part of a broader solution to conspiracy theories and their unintended side effect, misinformation.

There are two broad-based philosophies in Media Literacy:

1. Protect from Harm
2. Empowerment and Agency through Social and Civic Engagement
I. Protect from Harm

- Use filters and Safe Search features.
- Limit screen time with at-risk populations.
- Utilize “friction tools” that cause you to pause or work harder to do something online. Tech companies should be encouraged to add more friction tools.
2. Empowerment & Agency through Social & Civic Engagement

- Teach Social Emotional Learning skills to encourage emotional intelligence and understand biases.
- Understood moderation and reporting tools online.
- Create your own code of ethics for interacting online.
- Develop more robust digital literacy skills.
- Push back on misinformation whether through tech companies, relationships or other activities. #usetech4good
AI FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY GUIDANCE

All4K12.org [https://ai4k12.org](https://ai4k12.org)


Different states have also offered AI policies such as Virginia and Oregon. School districts are also developing their own policies. More are coming...
Resources to learn more

First Draft/Information Futures Lab
Dr. Claire Wardle
https://sites.brown.edu/informationfutures/

UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry
Dr. Safiya Noble
https://www.c2i2.ucla.edu

Harvard Graduate School of Education
Project Zero
Agency by Design (Maker Learning)
https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/agency-by-design
Resources to learn more

Dr. Casey Feisler
AI Ethics
@professorcasey

Ditch that Textbook
AI strategies/lessons to support educators
https://ditchthattextbook.com/category/artificial-intelligence/

Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University
https://cyber.harvard.edu

Center for an Informed Republic at the University of Washington
https://www.cip.uw.edu
Questions?

Keep in touch!
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  https://www.brookings.edu/articles/audible-reckoning-how-top-political-podcasters-spread-unsubstantiated-and-false-claims/

• New York Times, The People Onscreen are Fake, the Disinformation is Real

• Presentation template by SlidesCarnival