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NAVIGATING THE POST-TRUTH ERA: TRUST, MISINFORMATION, AND CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT ON ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

As access to news is increasingly mediated through social media platforms, there are rising concerns for citizens' ability to evaluate online information and detect potentially misleading items. While many studies have reported on how people assess the credibility of information, there are few reports on processes related to evaluating information online and people's decision to trust and share the information with others. This paper reports on the first part of a three-phase study, in the context of the Horizon 2020 Co-Inform project, which aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of citizens' practices and needs in assessing the credibility of information shared online and co-create solutions to address this problem. Data were collected from three European countries, through a survey on misinformation perceptions, focus groups, follow-up individual interviews, and co-creation activities with three stakeholder groups. The data were analyzed qualitatively, using, primarily, a grounded theory approach. Results from the citizens' stakeholder group indicate that personal biases, emotions, time constraints, and lack of supporting technologies impacts the credibility assessment of online news. Study participants also discussed the need for increased media literacy actions, especially in youth. Based on preliminary findings we argue that we need a diversified approach to support citizens' resilience against the spread of misinformation.

Introduction

The post-truth era has created worldwide concern about the spread of misinformation on social media platforms. People tend to consume news from online sources at a much larger scale, even from sources they may not trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Such behavior may invite exposure to fake news, lead to misinformation, and may be related to phenomena such as the diffusion and spread of fake news. The latter is of great

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concern, as it may reach a far greater number of people a lot faster than the spread of truth (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), and influence people's ideas, even when retracted. According to a study by BBC (Anderson & Rainie, 2017), experts identify declining trust in news sources as a grand challenge, with Brexit and the US 2016 elections mentioned as examples of the impact of misinformation campaigns. In light of such concerns, this paper describes a three-year research program investigating citizens' practices and needs on assessing the credibility of online news (Year 1, current paper), stakeholders co-creating socio-technical solutions (Year 2), and the assessment of the sustainability of the co-created solutions (Year 3), in an effort to understand how to create misinformation-resilient societies.

Social media and the spread of fake news

The rise of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) has shifted the distribution of news away from the traditional gatekeepers (e.g. media outlets and journalists) to lay persons, peer networks, and algorithmic technologies (e.g. recommender engines and bots). Increasingly, artificial intelligence is used for detecting misinformation and deciding how to personalize the user experience; nonetheless, it remains important to continue examining the role, needs, and preferences of the humans who are presented with the decisions of these technologies.

The challenge

In a recent report, Sergeant and Tagg (2019) argued that besides algorithms, users also contribute to polarizing discussions and create "isolated filter bubbles" (that is, being enclosed in social media spaces that only present information aligned with one's beliefs). According to Sergeant and Tagg, even when users find messages offensive, they may choose to remove themselves from the situation instead of engaging in dialogue and rebuttal; such behavior, and the beliefs that drive it, highlights the importance of user agency in confronting misinformation online. In another study, Hargittai and colleagues (2010) investigated how university students trusted content presented on websites. Their findings led them to argue in favor of media literacy actions to support the assessment of credibility of information, as students exhibited weaknesses in approaching webpages in a critical and reflective manner and adopted an unproblematized stance towards trusting search engine results. The findings of these empirical studies indicate a continued need to investigate the topic of the role of humans in trusting online news. As far as we know, few, if any, studies have studied credibility assessment by examining people's online social media behavior, especially regarding controversial social issues, such as migration. As pointed out by Hargittai et al., most studies have examined people's self-reports, but few have verified these reports by examining their practices in naturalistic settings. The present study attempts to contribute to both: first, understand citizens' needs and practices while assessing information they have received or shared on social media, and second, to investigate their actual behavior with in-depth performance tasks and interviews, instead of relying only on self-reports.

The study

We report on the first part of a three-phase study, conducted in the context of the European Commission, Horizon 2020 Co-Inform project. This first phase focused on gaining in-depth understanding of citizens' practices and needs in assessing the

credibility of information shared in online social media, to compliment what is already known on the subject through the extant literature.

Methods

Data were collected from three co-creation sites in three European countries (Austria, Greece, Sweden), using focus group interviews, and individual in-depth interviews with a sub-set of the participants at each site. A series of three co-creation workshops were planned for each national site. These workshops focused on understanding the needs and co-creating solutions for addressing misinformation shared in social media on the complex and sensitive topic of migration. Representatives from three stakeholder groups (citizens; journalists/fact-checkers; and policymakers) were invited to participate in the first co-creation workshop. A total of 68 people participated in all workshops (final number of participating citizens: Austria, 7; Greece, 13; Sweden, 7) Each session begun with a Eurobarometer survey on participants' attitudes towards misinformation, followed by a focus group interview with each stakeholder group, and co-creation activities with all stakeholder groups. The individual interviews with citizens (n=7) took place approximately two weeks after the end of each co-creation workshop. The data were coded and analyzed qualitatively with satisfactory inter-rater agreement.

Results

The focus group activity identified the citizens' views of credibility assessment practices, and the challenges these citizens perceived when evaluating online sources. The individual interviews verified the group reports, and triangulated the findings on actual online practices, motivation, the process of credibility assessment in social media, and risks and challenges associated with misinformation. Participants pointed to time constraints, lack of skills, lack of supporting technologies, and uncertainty of the impact of their actions, as issues that prohibit them from properly evaluating online sources. Design recommendations that emerge from the citizens' stakeholder group underline the need for developing new functionality or enhancing the existing functionality of the social media platforms, to address the problem of misinformation, and indicate a desire for greater transparency of such functionality. Participants also emphasized the importance of reflective and critical appraisal of the information and the need for media literacy actions, especially for youth.

Conclusion

Social media are changing the way information spreads, with young people exhibiting preference for news formats that are more engaging, interactive, and light, despite reports that they find traditional news formats, such as print newspapers, more credible than online sources (Johnson & Kaye, 2016). In a perennial fight of "machines against humans", it is important to remember that technologies are social systems. As our findings suggest it is of utmost importance to understand current credibility assessment practices in informal learning spaces, such as online social media, and their relation to the spread of misinformation, co-create and test technological solutions, and plan digital media literacy actions as emancipatory approaches to problematizing online news consumption and redistribution.

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