

The Social Disaster of Unregulated Social Media

2020

Thomas A. Burns Ph.D.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

In the last ten plus years, internet based social media has exploded at the national and global levels. Google, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, Instagram, etc. have become multi-billion dollar companies while both they and the independent internet blogs and podcasts have become the major sources of information for most individuals. Initially, social media projected itself in ideal terms – connecting at light speed virtually every citizen of the world, first with everyone else and second with anything that these citizens might want to know or buy. That is the positive function claimed by social media and internet browsers.

It did not take long for the dark side of this enterprise to emerge because as financial ventures, these global scale companies are exclusively focused on maximizing their profits. Using artificial intelligence [AI] together with huge data collection bases, these social media companies can access, retain, and deliver to any interested party willing to PAY all of the choices that every individual makes as he or she utilizes the internet. And, most importantly, this capability opens the door to enormous monetary gains for these companies.

While the initial focus of these internet and social media enterprises was promoting the products and services of commercial businesses, in short order information itself emerged as a VERY “valuable” product. And these social media enterprises, along with the many internet blogs and podcasts, quickly realized that the more sensational the information that they made available to a gullible – and often frustrated – public, the greater were their financial returns. In addition, unlike the established print and broadcast media, no restrictions or “journalistic” traditions of responsibility exist for social media regarding the accuracy of the information that they project into the worldwide public domain. Moreover, these internet information platforms could hide their greed and irresponsibility behind the 1st Amendment free speech right, and/or assert that entertainment rather than accurate information passing was their intent!

The consequence: In this entirely unregulated context, social media companies along with internet blogs and podcasts have been allowed to become instantaneous and global scale rumor mongers and dispensers of propaganda, disinformation, fake news, and baseless conspiracy theories. In addition, utilizing AI, these social media companies can target the exact individuals who will be most receptive to [interested in] specific types of disinformation on nearly any subject. The result: a highly efficient, worldwide and instantaneous rumor/propaganda system has arisen which is readily available to be exploited

for nefarious purposes by all kinds of interested parties, including “cyber” actors at the state level who seek to influence the attitudes, behavior, views, and votes of whole national populations.

In this totally unregulated setting, social media becomes an extraordinarily powerful mechanism to rapidly concentrate and radicalize targeted populations of individuals. As people worldwide have come to rely more and more on the internet and social media for all kinds of information and as social media tailors more and more of this information to the specifically identified interests of these separate individuals, people are being fed only what “the record” indicates that they want to “hear.” In this highly prioritized system, exposure of individuals to alternative information sources and views shrinks exponentially. As a consequence, individuals have become isolated in their self-affirming information bubbles, whether this bubble is politically, economically, or socially conservative or progressive. The political result: extreme polarization is magnified to the point of radicalization/insurrection in a system that is currently generating and targeting information that is without any filters for its reliability.

So, WHO cares?? Society Cares!! Because society is only sustainable if its citizens cooperate, share, compromise, and have basic trust in one another. The disconnect of public information from truth invites very dangerous consequences at all social scales from families to nations. The answer to this currently disastrous situation: Integrated national and international regulation of social media and internet browser companies must be created and implemented which requires that all information made available for public consumption on the internet by any individual, group, organization, business, or government must pass a universally available fact checking filter before it can be distributed.

Yes, it is a huge challenge to develop and implement such regulations, but we have succeeded at least at the national level with other similar challenges that have necessitated careful regulation and enforcement – water, air, food, utilities, drugs, even banks, etc. Information in the internet realm is just one of the next big regulation challenges [together with climate change, gun control, money in politics, inequality, etc.] that our incessant pursuit of “progress,” economic gain, and new technology has produced!

A free press must also be a responsible press – whatever the media/medium of this “press” may be. Internet based social media and all of the relevant “platforms” within it must be brought under this regulatory umbrella if modern society is to survive with a modicum of integrity. Social media must stop being allowed to cry the equivalent of “Fire” in the theater of national and global society. Free speech in the public arena must be responsible, reliable speech.