

After a Quick Break
The Evolution and Consequences of Unreliable Information
In Modern American Media
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Background

Post WWII with the emergence of the broadcast news media [radio and TV], broadcasters had to obtain licenses from governmental authorities that required companies to meet accuracy standards in the information they purveyed. The result was an ethic of journalistic integrity among broadcast providers. This ethic included three basic requirements: 1) all key facts must be reported to avoid selective representation, b) the key facts must be independently confirmed as accurate to curtail rumor mongering, and c) alternative points of view must be represented in the interpretation of the facts to curtail bias. This ethic was intended to protect the public interest in being properly informed, and at re-licensing points, the public could provide input on how well the “rules” were being met.

From the outset, there were substantial forces at work within the broadcast industry itself working against this ethic being fully implemented and sustained. The particular “airwaves” assigned to different broadcast companies were available to anyone with the proper receiving devices, and so access by consumers was beyond company control and therefore “free.” To be economically viable, broadcasters had to locate an alternative source to pay for their services. The answer was to charge advertisers for the opportunity to instantaneously promote their products to a potentially massive audience in periodic “time outs” interspersed with the news programming.

This option was very attractive to advertisers. But, in behalf of their economic interests, advertisers wanted to know what programs of what types at what times were most appealing to the customers to whom they were seeking to sell their products. Accordingly, marketing analysis by advertisers and broadcasters allowed them to maximize their financial interests by determining what kind of programming different identified consumer groups favored at what times. The result was commercial pressure to adjust programs to best fit the interests and perspectives of particular consumers. This included news/information programs.

In addition, it was quickly realized that the more current, sensational and/or alarming the information was that broadcasters offered on their news programs, the larger was the audience and the greater was the level of its attention – to

both the offered programming and the associated advertising. But, adjusting programming to accommodate the interests of particular groups and to focus on sensational, alarming, immediately current events in order to maximize financial benefits placed broadcasters in direct conflict with the restraining principles of journalistic integrity – the full facts, confirmed, and respecting varying viewpoints. And these principles underpinned the FCC's licensing requirements.

Internal, financial, vested interest based pressure was present virtually from the start working against journalistic integrity in the broadcast media industry! No surprise, seeking an escape hatch was constant.

The Transition

Enter first the wired, and then the internet based media providers who were technically no longer “broadcasters.” Under these provider umbrellas, all kinds of independent radio and TV “shows” arose largely unrestrained by the FCC. Independent “celebrity” hosts with extreme views could promote more and more sensational views to more and more exclusive audiences with advertisers keying their appeals specifically to those subgroups.

The Current Situation

Within a relatively short time, under the banner of free speech, full blown rumor mongering and conspiracy theorizing has become common serving more and more selected audiences that can be more easily specified and served using access to artificial intelligence developed by internet platform providers.

Contributing to the escalation of this process are unregulated internet podcasts and social media platforms. Their “Smart” phone outlets have magnified a) the speed of disinformation distribution, b) the radicalization of individuals, and c) the consolidation of extremist groups – creating relatively isolated/insulated virtual worlds for “manufactured” consumer groups.

Even the original broadcast companies have eased their commitment to the journalistic ethic and trended toward serving specific audiences by offering news “shows” with opinion-loaded celebrity hosts and their supporting “experts.”

The Negative Effects of the Reduction of Information Reliability

- 1) Substantial loss of the commitment to unity in diversity at all levels of society.
- 2) Increase in extremism/division in all facets of society:
 - Economic – the homeless and the billionaires,
 - Political – far left progressives and far right conservatives,
 - Environmental – climate change alarmists and deniers,
 - Social – racial, religious, ethnic, educational, sexual, etc. divisions.

- 3) Substantial loss of commitment to cooperation and compromise, especially politically.
- 4) Dramatic increase in private group militias, individual armament, and violence.
- 5) Reduction in the commitment to democracy, rule of law, and the judicial process.
- 6) Increase in commitment to all kinds of conspiracy theories – to the point where the entire structure of government at all levels is viewed by some as corrupt – the Deep State.

The Conclusion

When the reliability of information available to the general public is dependent upon purveyors with a strong economic interest, and when the public finds sensational news the most “attractive,” the stage is set for conflict between the interests of the information purveyors and the governmental requirement for journalistic integrity. The advent of market analysis, the internet, social media, and the use for economic gain of artificial intelligence virtually assure that information made available to the public will become tailored to appeal to particular audiences with particular perspectives, interests and values. Over time, increased information isolation of these audiences matures through the radicalization process into social group extremism on multiple grounds – political, economic, racial, ethnic, religious, etc. Extremism fosters violence among different groups and undermines the fundamental principle of unity in diversity that is essential for sustaining democracy and the rule of law in modern complex societies. This is the perilous present state of the United States and, to different degrees, of many other countries that claim to be representative democracies.

The Solution

National level regulation must be formulated, implemented, and enforced to assure the accuracy of ALL information that is made available to the public by any means. Only strictly private communication that remains private can be excluded under this regulation – respecting the right of free speech. The public interest in having all parties in possession of reliable information must exceed the personal right of free speech when speech becomes public by any source, by any means.

There is nothing new here: it has been recognized for a very long time that the right of free speech does not extend to yelling “Fire” in a crowded theater when there is no fire. Our modern theater is all media! Our modern “Fire” is sensational disinformation and outright conspiracy mongering.