Editorial: Reality filters: disinformation and fake news

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The recent past has been characterised by both a rise in fake news and the emergence of a febrile political atmosphere. Increasingly social media and digital networking are coming under the spotlight as significant causes. The internet has become perhaps a disinformation superhighway, the promised wisdom of crowds (Suriwuecki, 2004) degenerating into the clamour of the twitter mob (e.g. Ronson, 2015). Fake news and disinformation have come to dominate, and the democratising effects of digital media have been undone by increasing concentrations of power into a handful of tech companies. In this editorial we explore the rise of fake news and how it is transforming public discourse.

The evolution in the use of the term "fake news" itself illustrates the problem of disinformation on the World Wide Web. It was coined to describe fabricated news stories that were sometimes deliberately designed to mislead its audience by masquerading as mainstream news reporting. However, the term "fake news" was quickly appropriated by political actors to describe content from mainstream news outlets that contradicted particular political agendas, with the intention of discrediting that content. Thus what began as a label for misinformation spread by social networks became a part of the disinformation war itself. 'Fake news' is now widely repudiated as a descriptive term as a consequence of this evolution. However it exemplifies the way in which truth appears to dissolve into the virtual suspension of digital culture. In digital contexts everything tends to noise, making it difficult to distinguish reliable information from propaganda.

It was not mean to be like this. To the extent that their political ideals coalesced in a meaningful and articulate ways, the architects of the digital revolution in the 1970s and early 1980s largely embodied a liberal libertarian tradition intent on democratising access to information and computing. Computing was seen as a social good, and widening access as a progressive ideal. On the West Coast of the United States for example the Community Memory project established the first public bulletin board system and the Homebrew Computer Club was enthusiastically sharing code, hardware and ideas. In a still divided Berlin the Chaos Computer Club was forming the first hacker collective, and in Cambridge UK where small entrepreneurs were developing cheap and accessible home computers. The now fading memory of post-war counter-culture was distilled in silicone and code, which over time would emerge as its enduring legacy. The aim was not to concentrate power but to distribute it.

In his book about the computer revolution Stephen Levy outlined the principles of hacker culture:

- Access to computers – and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works – should be unlimited and total.
- All information should be free.
- Mistrust authority – promote decentralization.
- Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race or position.
- You can create art and beauty on a computer
- Computers can change your life for the better. (Levy, 1994)

Free information was intended to enhance democratic oversight; the computer would liberate individuals by allowing them to access information free from the influence of governments and corporations. The driving ideal was the hacker ethic of sharing and collaboration, through which individuals and communities could gain empowerment through collective endeavour. These ideals

informed the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web and are even evident in the origins of social media and social networking. They now appear hopelessly naïve. Where did it all go wrong?

In February 2019 the UK Parliamentary Committee for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Inquiry into fake news and disinformation highlighted the ways in which social media platforms are driven to maximise user engagement by delivering impactful information to user desktops. This has the effect not only of creating closed loops of political ideas, but of spreading negative news stories because of their greater stickiness. The committee noted:

> We have always experienced propaganda and politically-aligned bias, which purports to be news, but this activity has taken on new forms and has been hugely magnified by information technology and the ubiquity of social media. In this environment, people are able to accept and give credence to information that reinforces their views, no matter how distorted or inaccurate, while dismissing content with which they do not agree as 'fake news'. This has a polarising effect and reduces the common ground on which reasoned debate, based on objective facts, can take place (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019: 5).

The openness and accessibility of the Internet and World Wide Web has arguably been turned against the interest of end users, ensnaring them in closed loops of misinformation, half-truths and lies. End-users have been transformed into the product, neatly enveloped by clouds of demographic data that can be exploited to hijack individual attention by precisely targeted advertising, clickbait and political messages. It is no longer computer systems that are hacked, but our minds, values and beliefs. Social media of all kinds has become a reality filter, distorting the world to fit our pre-exiting ideals and selling back to us our values and beliefs.

Reality filters

Yet perhaps the cause and effects of technology and social media are not quite so clear cut. Over the past twenty-years the world has gone through a profound period of technological change. This heralds significant shifts in the structure of society, public discourse, and the economy. Although there are reasons to suspect the technological revolution may be slowing down, the long-term consequences for the order of society are perhaps only beginning to be felt. These effects may shake-out over the coming decades, profoundly altering the organisation of society. The current anxiety about the influence of fake news is perhaps just a part of that process rather than the end-product of technologically mediated culture. And technology may be the most potent tool in overcoming it.

It is easy to over-estimate the power of individual social and political actors, and to see malign influence in the power of political advertising and politically biased news reporting, or to see political uncertainty as the outcome of organised forces. All new media technologies have been accompanied by fears about their use as propaganda tools, and while propaganda, disinformation and misinformation remain real and potent forces, the social system has proven to be remarkably robust. Society is a dynamic and adaptive system, comprising many individual actors each of whom contribute to the whole. Its dynamic nature means that social actors of all kinds adapt their behaviours to the prevailing conditions. Successful strategies quickly encounter new obstacles to their success.

Fake news and digitally distributed disinformation succeed by piggy-backing on established trust-networks, such as the global news organisations, and friendship networks. Inevitably they will tend to undermine those very trust networks through which they proliferate.

There are three ways to think about the long-term impact of widespread online disinformation spread by social networks.

- In the first instance people may tend to trust in online disinformation because it mimics the indices of trust on which they have become used to relying by masquerading as reliable information from reputable sources disseminated via trusted relationships. This implies a kind of free-floating credulity in which any ideas however outlandish come to be believed because they are associated with positive connotations of trust.

- As disinformation grows people may tend to lose trust in all sources of information and news, and come to disassociated the existing indices of trust and reliability that they had previously associated with reputable sources. This implies a kind of free-floating scepticism in which all information and news is treated with mistrust.

- Eventually a new balance between scepticism and trust may be struck relying on new indices of reliability and truth that allow people to come to pragmatic decisions. This implies a kind of recalibration of the balance between credulity and scepticism, and different forms of critical shortcuts to allow us to come to balanced but pragmatic and expedient opinions.

These are not of course stages as such, but rather tensions within the general discourse that exist to varying degrees at different times. However there is some evidence that there is a generational shift in attitudes towards fake news and disinformation. The rise of fake news has tracked the growth of social media use amongst older users through the 2000s. For older users the connotations of trust attached to the traditional structures of news production are almost certainly strongest, and as a consequence older users are much more likely to share fake news stories via social media (Guess et al, 2019). As younger generation come to prominence, raised in the multi-platform age of the internet, the connotations of trustworthiness are likely to be very different. The ideals of the pioneers of the computing revolution may not have been misplaced as such, but their realisation may take longer than anticipated.

In this process information professionals have an important role to play. Over the past twenty years the information profession has played a pivotal role in information and digital literacy education, and in understanding the ways in which information filters through society in the digital age. These are the skills that are fundamental to countering the rise of online disinformation, not through increased regulation of content – although that may also play a role – but through empowering individuals to develop improved critical skills to enable them to evaluate the sources of information that they consume, from wherever it derives.

September Business Information Review

This issue sees the publication of the 2019 Business Information Review Annual Survey. The BIR Annual Survey is the worlds' longest running research into trends within the business information sector. Since 1991 it has provided an invaluable guide to emerging issues, changing technologies,

and professional values. The 2019 survey is the fourth written and researched by Denise Carter of DCision Consult. Some of the key themes that have emerged in this year's survey include:

1. The challenges of new and emerging tools and technologies and ensuring organisations have the right skills to manage these effectively.

2. The potential for Information Professionals to become the organisational strategic advisor for data and information across the whole organisation.

3. Whether Information Professionals still view themselves as subservient in organisational relationships, and whether they feel their role is to answer queries reactively or to proactively provide data that provokes new discussions and questions.

4. The integrity and ethics of data: where data come from; how it is manipulated, and whether good ethical standards in data management will become fundamental in the future.

5. The increasing importance of information literacy.

The BIR Annual Survey has now been running for twenty-nine years. From its inception it was recognised that the survey might reveal useful longitudinal data about trends and changes in the profession. However aside from a brief review of the first ten years published in 2000, no comprehensive review of the surveys has taken place. The second paper in this issue addresses this gap. The first of a two-part review of twenty-nine years of the annual survey, it explores in particular the way in which technological change has been tracked by the research over time, and what this reveals about the role of emerging technology in the profession. The second part of this review will be published in the December issue.

Our third paper this issue was written by Eddie Collins and Delphine Phillips of Integreon. Entitled 'Automation – it does involve people' the paper explores the benefits of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) – software which can be used to mimic repetitive administrative tasks that traditionally require human intervention, such as data transfer. The final paper is entitled 'The Impact of Business Intelligence through Knowledge Management' and was written by Wassila Bouaoula, Farid Belgoum, Arifusalam Shaikh, Mohammed Taleb-Berrouane and Carlos Bazan. The paper explores the uses of Business Intelligence tools in Knowledge Management.

Best paper prize 2018

We're pleased in this issue to announce the winner of the *Business Information Review* Best Paper prize 2018. The prize is awarded to the research or professional paper judged by the editorial board and editors as the most successful, interesting, or relevant over the course of the preceding year. A number of papers stood-out over the course of the year, including Mark West & Delphine Philips' 'Exploring the future of Business Information Services in the financial sector' published in ???, and Hal Kirkwood's 'The current state of artificial intelligence and the information profession' published in ????. However, the 2018 best paper prize has been awarded to Andrew Lambe, Fiona Anthoney, and Jo Shaw's paper 'One door closes, another opens: Surviving and thriving through organizational restructure by ensuring knowledge continuity' published in September 2018.

The paper addresses the experience knowledge continuity and organizational memory during NHS England's organizational restructuring in 2015. It recounts the approach taken by the Knowledge and Intelligence (K&I) team of the Sustainable Improvement (SI) team at securing organizational knowledge following the Smith Review of Improvement and Leadership Development in the NHS and its consequences, charting the stages in the migration of content, the development of new retrieval tools and the development of a new knowledge service. It provides an interesting and highly relevant case study, and we are very happy to award it the BIR Best Paper Prize 2018.

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