Information Matters: Social Media, Algorithms and the Financial Incentive

In our last installment of Information Matters, we explored how certain types of disinformation become easier to understand when viewed within the broader context of global power struggles. In addition, we examined two key tools frequently used by our political adversaries to spread disinformation online—often in subtle and hard-to-counter ways—in an effort to weaken the U.S. and create strategic advantages for themselves.

In this installment, let's look at how the structure of the internet, particularly social media, facilitates the spread of disinformation.

By now, most of us are aware that the internet tracks our every move. Each time we do anything online—whether it's browsing a website, making a purchase, or simply liking a post—detailed information about our behavior, preferences, and interactions is quietly collected and meticulously analyzed and preserved. Over time, these bits of data form an amazingly comprehensive online profile of who we are, what we like, and how we engage with digital content, which companies then use to tailor our online experiences, influencing everything from the ads we see to the news articles that appear in our feeds.

This tracking that online platforms engage in is often marketed as a point of convenience for the user, intended to enhance our experience (e.g., by making it more relevant and efficient). However, it's worth noting that companies also have substantial financial incentives to maximize user engagement by keeping all of us online longer. After all, not only does increased user engagement generally result in greater sales and ad revenue, but it also results in richer datasets, which can then be sold to other companies for still more profits. This business model, in which platforms compete for and monetize users' attention, is sometimes referred to as the attention economy.

Depending on our disposition, we may or may not be bothered by such intrusions on our privacy and subsequent gaslighting for the sake of corporate profits. Wherever we fall on these issues, the fact is there are other costs that come with this practice of data collection that should probably give us all pause.

For example, in order to ensure that users spend as much time as possible on their sites, platforms of all sorts employ engagement algorithms. An engagement algorithm is a set of programmed instructions that extrapolate from users' previous online activity to determine what kinds of content can be expected to keep them interested and engaged with the site in the future. In other words, it is a program that looks to see what kinds of content have held the user's attention in the past and then adjusts his/her feed to show him/her more of the same in the hope of keeping him/her online for longer periods of time.

This may seem harmless if what we're talking about is pictures of shoes or cute cats, but it's entirely another kind of thing if what we're talking about is health information or news about political and/or social events. This is because engagement algorithms are not just about what the user sees; they're also about what users don't see. The effect of these algorithms is to create closed and self-reinforcing information loops in which our existing beliefs are continually reinforced at the same time as any divergent or disconfirming evidence is filtered out.

In this sense, what they do is enable each one of us to imagine that things in the world are, in every case, exactly as we understand them to be. Put another way, they offer a perfect breeding ground for disinformation to take hold.