

Information Matters: The Importance of Journalism

Thus far, we have spent a fair bit of time in this series unpacking the phenomenon of disinformation: looking at what motivates it, how it's spread, and how it works on us to shape our understanding of the world we share.

As we've discussed, while the problem of disinformation isn't new, it has become more intense in recent decades, in part as a consequence of the financial model underpinning the internet and its architecture, a model that prioritizes engagement over accuracy and truth.

Unfortunately, these difficulties are made still worse as a result of certain trends in the modern media environment.

For one thing, in recent decades we've seen a notable decline in local news. As local reporting has diminished, we've shifted away from news delivered by familiar, trusted sources covering easily verifiable stories toward news from distant, unknown figures reporting on events we can't easily confirm or disconfirm. This shift has created an environment where the idea of "fake news" can more easily take hold.

To make matters worse, over the last 40 years the wider media landscape has undergone dramatic changes, starting with the rise of cable news and continuing with the expansion of the internet. The launch of 24-hour cable news networks in the 1980s introduced intense competition and enormous financial incentives, which, combined with the pressure to fill every hour with content, shifted the focus toward more sensational and personality-driven reporting. Several decades later, the internet further fragmented news

sources, creating information silos in which users can limit themselves to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. This fragmentation has intensified polarization and has introduced dramatically new interpretations of what constitutes “legitimate” news.

These changes in our media environment are troubling because at the end of the day, facts and information are crucial to a free and democratic society. Nearly everything we value relies at some level on having reliable facts to refer to. For example, our security depends on facts because protecting people and systems requires accurate information to identify and address threats. (E.g., Do masks protect against viruses or not? Does wearing them all day damage student learning or not?) Similarly, fairness also depends on facts because we can only determine what is fair when we first assess what is true. (This is the whole premise of our legal system, which says that in order to determine whether or not someone should be punished, we first have to understand what they did.)

Ultimately, we can say there are two distinct kinds of truth. The first is the kind of truth we have been discussing to this point, namely truths about facts attaching to real people and events in the world. However, there is also a second kind of truth—the “truth” that attaches to important commitments or principles. Examples of such truths might include the belief that all people should be treated equally, that everyone is entitled to pursue their own happiness, and that we all are best served when powerful systems are held to account. Through belief in this second kind of truth, history has shown us time and again that otherwise ordinary people are sometimes able to do extraordinary things.

These two kinds of truth, one predicated on facts and the other on principles, can produce powerful changes when they come together. One place this regularly happens is in investigative reporting. What do reporters do? Reporters are in the business of trying to bring hidden facts to light so the

public can make more informed decisions. This difficult—and at times dangerous—work often pits reporters against powerful forces that would prefer certain facts remain hidden.

Good journalism is important because people need access to true information in order to make good choices. If the people in power are allowed to have access to information the rest of us don't have, we lose equality, and eventually our freedom. Being free means accepting there is a world—and people in it—from which we can learn. Reporters are the ones who expose the facts that enable our freedom. In this sense, it is perhaps not too much to suggest that if soldiers safeguard our physical freedoms, it is investigative reporters who man the frontlines protecting our intellectual freedoms, often at considerable risk to themselves. Such journalism may be harder to find than it has sometimes been in the past, but it is no less important. Good journalists do still exist. Their work is important and, in this very complex world, deserves all our support.