Information Matters: Ethical Content Creation

In previous generations, people wanting to shape public discourse were dependent on a small number of publishers, broadcasters, and other gatekeepers to amplify their voices. In stark contrast, 21st century technologies have made it so that anyone with an internet connection can be a content creator.

As potential creators of content, what responsibilities are imposed on us by this new world of radically democratized access and constant information flow? In light of the concerns raised throughout this series, what obligations do we each of us have in shaping this digital landscape that we all share?

Necessity: Our first and most important responsibility as prospective content creators might be to pause and critically evaluate whether what we are considering uploading provides any sort of genuine value. The internet is awash in "takes", most of them not particularly interesting or original. Often, this tide of noise can make it difficult to find those comparatively rarer bits of content that are more interesting or thought-provoking. Does our content offer a truly new perspective? Does it challenge prevailing narratives? Does it offer insight that others might benefit from? If not, perhaps we shouldn't post it in the hope that, over time and through similar choices, the internet can gradually be made into a more meaningful and thoughtful place.

 Accuracy: Our next most important responsibility is to ensure that any information we share is accurate and based on established, verifiable facts. This responsibility takes on particular importance when the information being shared is about news stories, political events/policies, scientific data or any other critical topic that offers the prospect of real harm if inaccurately interpreted. In each case, ensuring accuracy entails doing our best to verify all the information to be shared ahead of time using credible, reputable sources and it means making sure to name or, better yet, link to these sources within our content. Linking to our sources reinforces the value of

copyright and intellectual property laws and it empowers our audience to assess for themselves the veracity of our claims.

Transparency: Transparency is another cornerstone of ethical content creation. Creators should be open about their sources of information, potential funding streams, conflicts of interest, and the purposes or agendas behind their content. For instance, if content is sponsored or contains affiliate links, this should be clearly disclosed to the audience so that they may be better positioned to critically evaluate the content they are consuming. Similarly, if our content makes use of generative AI, this use should also be clearly labeled and credit should be transparently attributed in order to reduce any risk of confusion in the minds of the audience and so that we may minimize the likelihood of its being taken up and deployed maliciously in connection with others' content.

Mindfulness: Ethical content creators have an obligation to be mindful of the potential real-world harms their content might cause. This includes being sensitive to the impacts of their words and images on various communities (e.g., by avoiding the reinforcing of harmful stereotypes) and considering the broader societal implications of their content. In particular, when discussing especially contentious or sensitive topics, we should look to avoid inflammatory language and/or images that might exacerbate existing social problems and/or divisions.

Humility: Finally, as creators, we have an obligation to be open to feedback and correction from our audience. Even the most careful among us will almost certainly share inaccurate information at some point. When such errors are identified, it is important to address them promptly and transparently, first by apologizing and next by providing correct information. This commitment to accountability serves to maintain trust with the audience, but, even more importantly, not only does it help to protect the integrity of the information ecosystem we share, but it also contributes to shifting the culture of online discourse in healthier and less divisive directions.