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How Social Media and Misinformation Complicate Journalism

August 13, 2020 By [Kevin LaTorre](#)

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News once required slamming presses and flooding editions. Now, it sometimes only requires *Add post* or *Tweet*. Social media, riding the tide of the internet, has transformed journalism today. But has it helped or harmed the profession?

Welcome back to [Refresh the Press](#). Let's outline how social media muddles 21st-century journalism through misinformation.

Social Media and News Intersect

Journalism must reckon with social media because the platforms have become a common pathway for news. Pew Research [found](#) (through self-reported surveys) that 18% of Americans receive political news primarily through social media. Those findings also suggested that these (usually younger) people seeking news through reported less engagement and lower political knowledge. Some Americans use social media for their news, though these findings suggest that they're not better for it.

Journalism also incorporates social media through journalists themselves.

Poynter [reported](#) back in 2015 that journalists and news sources comprised the largest, most-active group of "verified" Twitter users. It makes sense for news sites (like [our own](#)) and reporters to work within social media platforms. They give quick content directly to followers, and they allow real-time interaction

with existing groups. Not to mention that any social media platform gives reams of quotes for public consumption.

Why else do they intersect? Most social media companies say they intend to support public discussions. That public space has long been journalists' domain. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey owns that mission: "We believe our purpose is to serve the public conversation," he has [told](#) Wired. In turn, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has often [defended free speech](#) as his platform's central value. (Zuckerberg [has caught fire](#) for allegedly shielding falsehoods behind this stance, but we'll get there.)

Journalist Jeff Jarvis explained this news-to-social-media overlap [on Medium](#): "When journalists delete, dismiss, or engage from Twitter or Facebook or YouTube or Reddit or blogs, they turn their backs on the people who finally – like the journalists – have a printing press to call their own." In a more perfect world, it seems, social media would support the mission of journalism and add new voices which traditional media didn't always include.

But in practice, social media doesn't work like that.

Misinformation through Social Media Muddies Journalism

Because social media platforms enable a "public conversation" from billions of people, they include the misinformation such a large group generates. Note: *misinformation* means falsehoods spread unintentionally (while *disinformation* means falsehoods spread purposely).

In any setting, people say things which aren't true. They might exaggerate, or misremember, or misrepresent, or speak without thinking, or lie outright. We can't always discern why someone says something incorrect. But, on social media, that falsehood worsens: it becomes shareable, so that it spreads quickly and reaches countless users. And quickly you'll find a false narrative which millions of users already believe.

[Bridget Barrett](#), a PhD researcher at UNC-Chapel Hill, says the scale of social media is one key risk of misinformation. "It's simply impossible to fact-check the billion pieces of content going up," she says. "It's impossible to even identify what should be checked."

UNC Research Shows How Misinformation Crowds Social Media

Together with [Daniel Kreiss](#) and Madhavi Reddi, Barrett developed [a 2020 report](#) on this problem: "Enforcers of Truth: Social Media Platforms and Misinformation." It highlights social media companies' muddled fact-checking practices. "We were trying to look at when they are willing to draw lines against false information," Barrett says.

Bridget Barret.
Image courtesy of [UNC Hussman School](#).

The results don't inspire confidence. "Most false information is completely allowed," Barrett says. Of course, the social media companies involve outside experts to remove clear misinformation (health falsehoods, for example). But they only remove it in very specific circumstances.

Advertisers, for instance, face stiff controls. "If you're running ads, you're held to a tighter standard than average users," Barrett says (due to the monetary aspect of that content). However, the study found that public figures (like politicians) receive more exemptions. Think of what President Trump tweets, and of how much bickering happens if his tweets do (or don't) receive flags. Like many public figures, the president doesn't receive the stricter fact-checking policies. Most social media platforms don't have (or won't enforce) policies to prevent misinformation from those users.

Social media companies also present conflicting principles on misinformation.

Barrett adds that companies have “many rules that are clearly just not enforced.” This discrepancy is why she first joined the report: social media companies do detect some falsehoods, while publicly claiming not to mediate truths. “There’s one [policy] with Twitter where they say in their terms of service for advertisers that you have to be truthful and non-deceptive,” she says, “but then Twitter makes plenty of statements saying they’re not policing truth.” These contradictions obscure how any misinformation corrections work. But so do uneven enforcement across users and topics. “It basically feels like where they’re [acting] is wherever there’s public pressure to act,” Barrett explains.

Elections: A Worsening Emerging Misinformation Challenge

Elections are one place where social media companies have often drawn hard lines against falsehoods (as is health information, especially during COVID-19). “False information about time, place, and manner isn’t allowed,” Barrett explains. “It’s often used as voter suppression, historically targeted at Black communities or other communities of color.” She has found that, for the concrete details of the election process, companies will enforce stricter standards.

But rumors about election legitimacy, mail-in ballots and political candidates – most users can make them without repercussions, Barrett says. “They have no rules on the books,” she says. And yet, she admits that creating a good policy would be near impossible. “Any policy you try to write that would disallow the rhetoric that Trump uses would be a baby-with-the-bathwater scenario, where you end up throwing out a lot of legitimate cases [of election debates].”

Barrett believes that misinformation goes well beyond social media (where it might just be more obvious). “It exists in all media, in newspapers, on cable television, and from elected officials.” Between the reach of social media, the speed of their transmission and the misinformation everywhere else, she finds that the companies can’t do all they would need to.

Image courtesy of [CNN](#).

Why Misinformation Matters to You

For one, it’s one factor behind [the antitrust swell](#) that could corner larger tech companies whose platforms spread falsehoods. “I tend to lean towards the idea that these companies are too big,” Barrett says, “and that their large scale is part of the problem.” Though, she adds, if social media companies shrink, their misinformation wouldn’t immediately improve (it could just spread elsewhere). “It’s all conjecture at this point.”

Trust-busting any of the largest social media platforms would change how you use Facebook, Twitter or another site. Their reach might be less, and their users (including your friends or followers) could turn elsewhere. But, as Barrett says, imagining the exact impact is only conjecture.

Social media draws journalism into its orbit.

Multiple [journalists](#) and [commentators](#) have complained about this trend ([criticizing](#) Twitter especially). Often, news follows social media trends. But those trends don’t always represent the larger, offline society. Journalism tied only to Twitter and Facebook developments only presents news from Twitter and Facebook, leaving a gap that some critics have noticed.



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That same shiny-object lure happens for misinformation, too. Fact-checkers from news sources might catch falsehoods and debunk them. But that time spent combatting the misinformation draws attention away from other crucial topics besides the president, celebrities or fringe conspiracies. Not to mention, repeating a lie (even to debunk it) [risks ingraining it](#) even deeper. Journalists can't win: spend time following social media, and you might miss the whole picture; spend time correcting social media, and you might make its misinformation worse.

Social media often muddies what journalists try to do. Misinformation (active and slippery, since social media companies have their hands tied) often commands news sources' attention when it shouldn't. Of course, you ought to check in with in-depth analysis of things you read on Twitter or Facebook. But remember also to visit news sources directly – to consume your news wisely, you'll need more than 280 characters.

And as ever, don't forget that the humans who write news might carry [their own biases](#). That's one fact you should learn from our [Refresh the Press](#) series, which can better prepare you for the rapidly-changing world of 21st-century journalism. What more should you know?

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