The Cure to Digital Misinformation Must Spread

As someone who has enjoyed the vast digital world of social media for the past 10 years of my young life, it's been interesting to watch different platforms rise, fall, merge, grow, and evolve. It's fascinating to consider just how much more information we have access to compared to the countless generations of humans before us.

However, the rise of misinformation, disinformation, and deception as well as new ways of creating it have turned what was once a fruitful and relatively harmless virtual landscape of information into a dangerous one.

Pizzagate, a 2016 online conspiracy theory alleging the existence of a child-trafficking ring under a pizza shop in Washington D.C, led to employees, owners, and virtually anyone involved with the shop (and similar pizza shops in the area) facing a barrage of harassment that included death threats, doxxing, vandalism, arson, and even a shooting incident. If the theory's spread had been curbed sooner, perhaps this chaos would've been prevented.

When a missing Brown University student named Sunil Tripathi was falsely identified on social media as the 2013 Boston Bomber, the unchecked rumors made the discovery of his body a week after the terrorist attack even more earth-shattering for his family and friends.

Tripathi had suffered from depression and, unbeknownst to his family, took his own life a month before the bombing had occurred. Misinformation allowed a young man to be called a terrorist and allowed his family to be ruthlessly harassed as they searched for him; the absence of rumor-curbing mechanisms on social media made it impossible to prevent.

Since then, some of the largest social media platforms have acted to implement ways of fighting back against misinformation. I'm advocating that this becomes standard practice for *all* social media platforms.

X, formerly known as Twitter, took the misinformation epidemic into their own hands, introducing "Community Notes" in 2021 and expanding it in 2023. Community Notes is an "open, participatory system" that allows users to write notes that appear directly under a viral tweet. These comments, often providing context or debunking information within the tweet, are rated by a group of over 500,000 contributors, with the highest-ranking note becoming visible.

Meta, which operates Facebook and Instagram, has followed suit, developing community note systems of their own, although much less prevalent so far. TikTok, a platform with over 2 billion users, has yet to create any sort of crowdsourced misinformation detector. Neither has YouTube, which has 2.7 billion users, nor Reddit, which has 500 million users. It's important that all of these sites act accordingly, as misinformation often runs rampant on these platforms before spreading to others.

There's good reason why I'm pushing specifically for crowdsourced, community-driven misinformation curbing mechanisms on social media instead of simply calling for platforms or people to delete the posts themselves. First and most importantly, free speech is important. The right to spread false information is, unfortunately, a necessary one. Without it, we face towing the thin line between free speech and censorship. It's vital that we stay as far away from it as possible.

Second, posts that are deleted can never be corrected. Systems like Community Notes are so valuable because they allow users to speak freely while others like them work together to debunk

or contextualize the information. A deleted post's content can simply be reshared by the same user or other users, spreading and existing endlessly. Setting the record straight at its most popular source reduces the chance of someone seeing, believing, and distributing it elsewhere.

If bias is a concern of yours, developers have fortunately expected that. X's execution of their Community Note system includes sections explaining how they have accounted for the challenge of fairly representing diverse perspectives. Even the program's algorithm is fully accessible, ensuring trust and transparency between communities and platforms.

Providing the public with the necessary tools to combat misinformation and disinformation isn't just immensely helpful—it's borderline genius. But while we should applaud them, we should also encourage and hold other important platforms to the same standards.

As a journalism major, setting the facts straight is the most important part of the profession. An unregulated digital cesspool of information that feeds off virality is a journalist's worst nightmare, so it is in my absolute best interests to make sure the effort by these platforms are not only recognized but *advanced*.

There are countless instances of false information doing irreparable damage to reputations and conspiracy theories swirling out of control, leading to real-life consequences.

Social media companies' policies only enforce violations that are considered unequivocally harmful—think death threats and graphic content—because anything less is protected in the spirit of freedom of speech. The First Amendment, however, shouldn't prevent the developers of these platforms from considering how best to address and combat the damage that false information can do and has done time and time again. Platforms like TikTok, Reddit, and YouTube must join in on the fight against misinformation now. #FightFakeNews