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SCIENCE ARTS PHILOSOPHY POLITICS LITERATURE

Misinformation: A Pandemic of the Unvaccinated?

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On June 15 of this year, the National Constitution Center hosted a session entitled, “Free Speech, Media, Truth and Lies”. The topic for the session, as described by the National Constitution Center website, was “Should the government or private companies identify and regulate truth and lies?” There were three speakers. Harvard Law School Professor (and former Dean) Martha Minnow argued for the role of government regulation to reverse the tide of internet misinformation, the Cato Institute’s Paul Matzko argued against a government role (predictably; he’s at the *Cato Institute*), and Jonathan Rauch (of Brookings), author of the seemingly omnipresent recent book *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, landing somewhere in the middle. (There’s a nice write-up of the discussion by Rachel Reed at *Harvard Law Today*.)

Minnow sketched a number of remedies to address the problems plaguing today’s online information ecosystems. To reverse the decline of local newspapers and legacy media publications, Minnow suggested that online media outlets should be required to provide “payment for the circulation of material developed by others.” Minnow also discussed the revival of the Fairness Doctrine for the internet age, mandating coverage of a range of ideas by online media sources.

Matzko pushed back most directly against this latter suggestion of Minnow’s, the idea of reviving the Fairness Doctrine. As he put it, “Few things send a shudder down my spine quite like hearing we should apply a public interest standard.” (Remember, *Cato Institute*.) Matzko drew on research that he did for his book, *The Radio Right*, which documented how the Kennedy Administration used the Fairness Doctrine to censor critics of Kennedy’s legislative agenda.

Rauch began by suggesting that Minnow’s discussion risked conflating two separate problems. One problem involves what he has characterized as the “epistemic problem” — the problem that the current internet information landscape is characterized by a “hostility to truth”. The other problem involves “the collapse of the business model for reality-based journalism.”

Although Rauch seemed to grant that policy design may have a role in dealing with the second — economic — problem, Rauch suggested that government regulation likely can do little to tackle the “epistemic problem”. Rather, Rauch seemed to suggest that, rather than in policy design, “the real magic in the long run is going to be product design.” The goal, according to Rauch, is to make online platforms “less friendly to misinformation.”

The way to achieve that goal, Rauch suggested, is to change the norms governing the practices of internet media. Rauch drew a parallel between the truth-hostile environment in print media up until the late 19th century. He suggested that, just as professionalization of print journalism from the latter half of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century resulted in truth-directed norms for the print media, a similar movement could result in analogous developments leading to truth-directed reforms in internet information networks.

Much as it pains me to say it, I am skeptical that Minnow’s government-based solutions are fit for purpose to correct the epistemic problem that she and Rauch rightly diagnose. In particular, I shudder to think how a Trump (or Cotton, or Hawley, etc.) Administration might use a newly-revived Fairness Doctrine to stifle progressive media. However, I’m also skeptical that Rauch’s norms-based solution will work, either.

This discussion of the media’s role in society’s current epistemic crisis called to mind the recently newly updated book, *The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media*. In that book, Brooke Gladstone frames her discussion of free speech, media, truth, and lies around the idea of “The Influencing Machine”.

The idea comes from a paper by the psychoanalyst Viktor Tausk, “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia”, which appeared shortly before Tausk took his own life in 1919. Tausk observed that a number of his schizophrenic patients had the idea that they were being controlled at a distance by an electrical apparatus, and hypothesized that his patients were projecting onto this machine those aspects of themselves that they were too ashamed to recognize as their own. The Influencing Machine, in other words, is a defense mechanism, allowing those in the grip of the machine to maintain an image of themselves as pure while “offloading” all offending personality traits to the machine.

As her organizing idea suggests, Gladstone questions whether the recent feverish accusations hurled at the media — it threw the 2016 election to Trump, it foments insurrection and the “Big Lie” about the 2020 election, it encourages vaccine conspiracies, etc. — are also a projection. On this reading, the media is the “Influencing Machine” on which our ailing body politic projects its own dark, twisted impulses.

I have to admit that I’m a sucker for such debunking attempts. And of course, I’m not alone. I can imagine the click-bait title of the think-piece already: “The Media Isn’t the Problem; We Are”. Just how true, though, is this framing of the issue of media influence as only a nightmare of deluded fantasies?

Just a little Googling will tell you that we’re not just dealing with deluded fantasies of media influence. To take one of the most extreme examples, just consider the title of this devastating

2018 article from the New York Times: “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts from Myanmar’s Military”.

The 2018 Rohingya genocide in Myanmar might seem very remote from 2021 America. Even in the United States, however, there is a very real worry that internet misinformation might be reaching crisis levels.

For a 2020 example that already seems dated, see the rise of Judy Mikovits’s viral film “Plandemic”. Or, for more lasting media effects from 2020 until now, consider the way that Covid-19 infection rates and vaccine hesitancy track Fox News viewership.

As this last point suggests, however, I’m not sure that framing these discussions in terms of THE media is helpful.

In her book, Gladstone recounts a quote that “veteran Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus [recalled] that Senator Eugene McCarthy once told him. He said the press is a bunch of blackbirds — all on a wire. One bird will fly to another wire, and when it doesn’t get electrocuted, all the birds will fly to that other wire.” (Gladstone, *The Influencing Machine*, p. 45)

Gladstone suggests that this timidity on the part of the press is less problematic when there is vigorous debate in the public sphere. For example, if the Congress airs substantive criticisms of the President’s agenda, the press feels more comfortable documenting those criticisms. After all, members of Congress criticizing the President’s agenda is itself a story!

Problems arise when there is too little vigorous, substantive debate within recognized institutions. (See, for example, the run-up to the second Iraq War after 9/11.) In such cases, the press is too risk-averse to generate such debate, often waiting until disastrous consequences to issue a post mortem ... or a mea culpa. (Again, see the Iraq War. Remember this? “Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged — or failed to emerge.” Or perhaps this?)

The effects of this media timidity are exacerbated by the current makeup of the two political parties in the United States. If one party is reflective of the scientific consensus on vaccines and anthropogenic climate change, reflective of the economic consensus on the failure of trickle-down economics, reflective of the epidemiological consensus on the link between high rates of gun ownership and the prevalence of gun violence (including suicides), etc., while the other party rejects (to echo Rauch’s term) “reality-based” policy, then reality-based *journalism* can appear partisan.

Seen through this lens, it’s *not* the case that there is no such thing as reality-based journalism anymore. Seen through this lens, it’s not the case a media diet that didn’t include Fox News (or any of the Sinclair television stations, Newsmax, One America, etc.) would count as epistemically unhealthy, or a filter bubble or echo chamber. (Note that filter bubbles are overhyped, anyway.)

Rather, to use a metaphor that is unfortunately familiar to many of us today, misinformation is a “pandemic of the unvaccinated”.