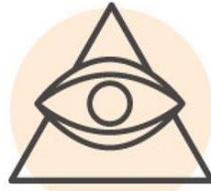


# NAVIGATING



# INFORMATION FATIGUE

MAY 13, 2021: SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIETY



FREE TO THE PEOPLE

## **Social Media and Society**

For this first half of the social media discussion, we’re focusing on the theme of “Social Media & Society.” There’s some overlap, as you’ll see next week—how individuals interact with social media is obviously of societal importance, and next week we’ll be focusing on what social media does to you—but we’re zooming out a bit to focus especially on the social consequences like political polarization, misinformation, and disinformation.

1. Social media is rooted in an “attention economy” where the goal is not to make you happy, or to make society better—these are businesses, after all—but to sell something. You might think they’re selling a good experience to you, but that’s now how the business model works: they’re selling your attention to advertisers and the massive amount of data that you have decided to give them.
2. Social media is *designed* to be addictive by creating “variable reinforcement” rewards: notifications, updates, new content: it all rewards you unpredictably. It combines solitude with sociality—reciprocal likes, FOMO (fear of missing out), envy (or “mimetic desire”) are all tied together with basic forces like vanity, desire, and so forth—it might make you feel badly (and impact your health, relationships, and productivity), but it’s all part of a “repetition compulsion”

In a lot of ways, social media is not new. It's a label that we've put on a type of technological application, but it's an old function. Before Facebook there were block parties, ice cream socials, PTA meetings, or whatever. Before YouTube became a hub for conspiracy theories, you could still hear them from friends, family, coworkers. Before everyone on Earth made the same pasta they saw on Instagram, recipes were shared among acquaintances and whole cultures had their own way of making food. Before there were dank memes, there were shared figures of speech.

And there still are all of those things. I want to suggest that what's "new"-ish about social media isn't that information is shared socially through media, which was always true, but really the *individuality*, *speed*, and *extent* of that transmission.

Let's start with speed and extent. In a 2013 book, Mark Andrejevic describes our current media environment as "Infoglut." We are exposed to an enormous amount of information—we always were, about our immediate surroundings and acquaintances—but now we're inundated daily with seemingly endless information about things all over the world well beyond our own experience, and as citizens in a republic, we are expected to choose leaders based on how they would handle a range of issues about which we really know very little as individuals:

It's reasonable to vote for a president who poses the least risk of nuclear war. Whether nuclear weapons are kept on an alert deterrence posture or "de-alerted" is therefore a major issue. But how much do you know about... [[long metonymic chain follows]]

So, what do we do when there's too much information? Typically, one of two things: decide on our "gut," or overanalyze and do nothing.

Bush (Iraq) v Clinton (Rwanda) example

This is how information glut helps us make bad decisions: we either decide to do what we wanted to do anyway, or we get lost in the details. I like true crime: more is produced per day than I could read if it was all I did, though. Even when we research, we tend to do it in bad ways: confirmation bias.

This is the new economy of information control: not scarcity but abundance. It used to be that totalitarian governments needed to restrict information—some of them still do—but now, it's usually enough to overproduce it. There's no guy from an alphabet agency in a black suit saying "nothing to see here"—instead, there's *everything to see everywhere* so information can hide in plain sight.

This is part of the erosion of scientific trust. It stems from a deliberate strategy pioneered by a guy named Frederick Seitz—you can read about it in Naomi Oreskes' book *Merchants of Doubt*. Tobacco industry. Then ozone, air pollution, acid rain, climate change...now vaccines and COVID. You don't have to persuade anyone that they're wrong—you just have to instill doubt. What do we get? Plandemic. Capitol Riots. QAnon. Chemtrails. Flat Earthers.

But if the truth is out there, Scully, can't you diligently find it?

Maybe, but it doesn't matter, because you can't usually convince anyone who doesn't already share your beliefs. This is the individual aspect of infoglut. We seek out people who we like, news channels that tell us what we want to hear (either good or bad), and we listen and talk to them. These are called "filter bubbles," and it means we hear a deafening echo back of our own opinions, hopes, and fears.

A clear, negative example of this is white supremacist online communities—everyone shares the same stuff with each other, bad science, constantly reinforcing stereotypes, and so forth

It's a great climate to magnify misinformation and disinformation. What's the difference? Misinformation is just wrong. Disinformation is designed to pee in the public pool of the Internet, to deliberately mislead.

Before liberals get really smug about conservative sheep falling for Republican "fake news," or angry about all that neo-reactionary disinformation, let's point out that it happens on the left, too.

- When bin Laden died—" I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy." Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.
  - Mistake—someone misquoted a Facebook status by Jessica Dovey, a Penn State grad teaching English in Japan. The first sentence was *her*, the rest is MLK ([Anatomy of a Fake Quotation MEGAN MCARDLE, the Atlantic, MAY 3, 2011](#))
- Doug Jones (D) defeated Roy Moore (R) in Alabama in 2017: also involved disinformation. "Project Birmingham" was a literal conspiracy to make it seem like Russian bots supported Moore (NPR interview, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/09/683731977/how-project-birmingham-spread-misinformation-in-the-2017-alabama-senate-election>), but that's particularly clever because democrats were doing things that mirrored actual Russian disinformation: they started fake Facebook groups to make it look like Moore was pushing alcohol prohibition (NYT, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/us/politics/alabama-senate-facebook-roy-moore.html>).

Here's where stuff gets really weird: None of this is really accidental. As we talked about last week, the "attention economy" really isn't about *you*, except as a raw material: if you're reading stuff, clicking on it, reposting it, then that's great for tech companies—it's attention and data. If you *don't like* something, you're still interacting with it. Pretty soon, algorithms can feed you more and more stuff that either makes you happy, causes you rage, or both—YouTube is notorious for conspiracy theories for this reason.

They probably aren't doing it *on purpose*, but asking them to regulate content is asking them to do something they *know is against their interests*.

And, the result is political polarization. The hardest thing to realize about these divides is this: the people on the “other side,” or “other sides,” don't necessarily even have different values than they do. They literally have different information: they don't know what you know, but *you don't know what they know, either*. You basically live in different worlds. Or here's another metaphor: you live in different *ecosystems*. You're a leopard seal, and you think everyone should eat penguins, it doesn't help if you tell your uncle the polar bear to start eating penguins: you live in Antarctica and he lives in the Arctic circle. He doesn't even know what a penguin *is*. Similarly, the people you're arguing with aren't always *ignoring* the information you've seen—it might not *exist* in their ecosystem at all, but contradictory things might.

Let's talk about bad information a little bit more but use a different term: propaganda. People don't say that a lot anymore, and when they do, they usually think of posters with bold colors, Uncle Sam saying “we need YOU in the US army,” or big splashy North Korean art of Kim Il Sung smiling benevolently down on some peasants. But why isn't what you see on social media *propaganda*? Arguably, it is: it lines up pretty well with what Jacques Ellul (*Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*) called *horizontal propaganda* way back in the 60s. We share it with each other. It doesn't come from a single office in Moscow (although, as Pomerantsev mentions...maybe it does, too). Think about wellness influencers on Instagram—major route for both QAnon and vaccine skepticism

So what do we do? You're in luck! Here's the one secret trick Zuckerberg doesn't want you to know!

No, I'm just kidding. No one is going to solve this problem: disinformation is probably as old as information: remember the bad little monkey and his berries from last week (Mercier and Sperber, *Enigma of Reason*). Conspiracy theories have been around forever—just like actual conspiracies have. Political polarization? Ask Julius Caesar about that, or better yet, the armies of Marc Antony and Brutus who fought the war that came after. We're going to have to deal with this as a society, but we're going to have to do it at a personal level.

One idea comes from the distinction between agonism and antagonism (Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau). We have to learn not to agree—we're not going to do that—but to “agree to disagree” such that we're at least listening to each other and finding ways to make things work.

There's not a lot of great research on this, but here are three ideas:

- Don't try to "win" arguments—try to actually talk (debate doesn't work—Dianne Mutz)
- Don't walk away, either—if you don't engage, you can't burst their bubbles...or your own (cf. Zoltron)
- Find the things you can agree with. QAnon is...not great. But they do care about children.

### **Suggested Reading:**

- Mark Andrejevic, [\*Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know\*](#)
- Naomi Oreskes & Erik M. Conway, [\*Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change\*](#)
- Jacques Ellul, [\*Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes\*](#)
- Peter Pomerantsev, [\*This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality\*](#)

**For a full list of book recommendations, visit:**

<https://www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-social-media>

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