Ethic of Fake News: An Analysis of Politically Motivated Reporting on Democracy

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Introduction

Advocacy journalism in media is driving public opinion to focus on tribalist partisan politics instead of centered administrative resolution. The lax objectivity standards of advocacy journalism permits misleading information to circulate under sensationalist media strategies at its worst and through ordinary negligence at its best. This method of journalism, adopted for its authentic representation in points of view, has proven to be an engine of confirmation bias and political polarization. Advocacy journalism puts significant burden on the public to establish a moderate public opinion from multiple sources. Moreover, modern distribution channels, fueled by algorithmic targeting on social media networks create echo-chamber effects that falsely justify the bias of its consumers and make moderate world perspectives more difficult to develop. Lastly, the upsurge of media bias has had corrosive effects on US political and administrative functions. This combination of reporting and distribution has led to a proliferation in subscribing to overt bias. As a result, US society has seen an uptick in greater dogmatic political strategies, decreased public trust, decreased party accountability, gridlocking in legislation proposals, decreased world standing, and debilitated public opinion (Binder, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2023).

Though protected under the first amendment, the overwhelming prevalence of advocacy journalism undermines the public trust bestowed to a free press. The polarized media climate, resultant of excessive advocacy journalism, has resulted in reporting tools such as watchdog journalism becoming nothing more than a defamation tool used against political oppositions. This impartial journalist tool in a biased media climate is used to detach party accountability and emplace allegations of abuses/ incompetencies of an opposing party. In effect, it leaves public opinion in a state of distrust and unprepared to engage in empirical discussion moderated by objective fact. Furthermore, adoption of advocacy journalism disseminated through modern channels, such as targeted consumer algorithms within social media networks, present ethical questions of big data use and national security risk. Left unchecked, the United States democratic process remains highly susceptible to psychographic persuasion tools like those used by Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 presidential election.

This paper provides insight on ethical issues/ dilemmas within the state of journalism and the mechanics of its distribution. It considers the ethical framework used to support the protection of

free speech and the implications of applying a teleological ethic in contrast to deontological ethic. It will propose an intergenerational ethical review in the feasibility of advocacy journalism and its ability to overcome the destructive forces of the bias it promotes within modern media channels. Review then will shift to questions of legitimacy within a reporting ethic that counters subscriber demand. The paper will conclude upon an accountability review of echo-chambers within social media; raising the most pressing question within 21st century media, is the distribution of free speech more influential on public opinion than free speech itself? If so, how do we safeguard public opinion to reflect the collective consciousness of our society and not let it be skewed by forces of influence that distribute its message?

The Deontology of Impartiality and Objectivity in Media

This analysis is conducted through a normative ethical framework grounded in deontological ethical theory. Its percepts that administrative decisions, especially upon the outset of events, are limited by bounded rationality (Simon, 1948). Therefore, it is important that ethical devices used to analyze media in the 21st century leverage a deontological ethic over a teleological ethic. It considers the denizen nature technology has taken to support the human experience and its influence upon public opinion. The integration of technology is especially prevalent within the millennial generation and is absolutely adopted in all successive generations. Further, it posits that a complete democracy is derived from a fully formed public opinion accomplished by balanced communication between citizens, experts, and politicians held accountable to their adopted policies (Dewy, 1922; Talebi, 2015).

This analysis holds that deontological ethics is paramount in preserving the integrity of constitutional democracies. This is especially true when used to protect the natural right of intellectual liberty. The deontological ethic places its emphasis of rightness within the means of free speech and not wholly the end state of free speech itself. Applied within the context of the press, it holds that free speech maintains intellectual liberty when its dissemination maintains impartiality in its availability to the public. In contrast, the teleological ethic places ethical value on the end state an action brings about. Traditionally and rightly so, the teleological ethic, has been liberally applied when protecting free speech and the press against regulatory action.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. declared that "the best test of truth is through the power of thought's acceptance in a competitive market." This statement emphasizes the importance of

maintaining a collective faith in the press in addition to protecting free speech when upholding First Amendment authority.[1] This leads to a deontological proposition to investigate the legitimacy of free speech when it exists in hyper-focused concentrations for an intended audience. It allows us to re-examine the weight teleological ethic holds on preserving free speech and evaluate if the dissemination of free speech can become more influential than speech itself. This evaluation could better define the meaning of "fake-news" and better solicit integrity, impartiality, and objectivity in media. Integrity used to define a media climate that provides enough objective fact so that public opinion is enabled to impartially detach from their inherent bias to achieve moderated ethical conclusions in supporting political functions.

The State of Reporting in Journalism

Inherent Bias in Reporting

It is impossible to remove bias from reporting, even if the reporting is done by objective impartial journalists. This is because of the human condition in reporting and is what led to the prevailing acceptance of advocacy journalism. Advocacy journalism openly accepts the human condition in reporting. Supporters reason that authentic expression of a given bias improves the reporting climate for consumers (Gregory, 2023). However, the abundance of advocacy journalism in American society has developed unforeseen consequences on American culture. It has led to factional identity politics, the politicization of normative issues, and a cultural shift amongst reporters in their reporting ethic. These consequences are worthy of an applied intergenerational ethical review for overcoming inherent biases in 21st century reporting.

Outside of sincere advocacy journalism, exists more extreme efforts of journalism used to deliberately attempt to persuade an audience unbeknownst to its readers. Additionally, reporting can also be done so indiscriminately that it inadvertently wields unintended consequences within a reporter's audience. Due to the strict protections in the freedom of speech both variances in reporting are difficult to discriminately regulate within the per view of the law (Justia, 2023). Private tools exist for consumers to use, though they are not pervasive enough in media

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[1] Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (Congress.gov, 2023).

consumption to overcome the current cultural effects associated with the dominance of advocacy journalism.

Tools to Combat Bias

Allsides media breaks down types of bias within their report "16 Types of Media Bias" (Mastrine, 2022). The report brings attention to methods found within biased reporting such as: spin, slant, unsubstantiated claims, sensationalism, mudslinging, bias by omission, flawed logic, and word choice among others. The report also addresses journalism's departure from traditional journalist ethics such as: truth, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and accountability. It states that 72 percent of Americans believe traditional news sources report "fake news" falsehoods or content that is purposely misleading. This is due to audiences consuming advocacy reporting while clinging to a traditional reporting ethic. Allsides, along with other independent actors like adfontesmedia, additionally provide media bias charts that enable consumers to frame the political bias associated with different news outlets. Though these tools are helpful it does not relieve readers of the burden to maintain awareness of the bias within their consumption. More importantly, the requirement of these tools to digest advocacy journalism further invites pragmatism concerns within this type of reporting.

Cultural Shift in Reporting Ethic

The new reporting ethic developing within reporting culture believes it is permissible to report an event without equal coverage. This new culture of reporters exists most prominently between ages 18-49, engage on print and online platforms, and are left leaning politically. This is problematic, because 76% of adults believe that there should be equal coverage in media, where only 44% of reporters believe the same (Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz, 2022). This change in reporting culture leaves the status of reporting in an ethical vacuum with minimum legal recourse. Though reporters are protected by the First Amendment, the methods they use to report their stories can have corrosive effects on the democratic process and aren't delivering the journalism consumers want. There is a developing demand within the state of journalism that warrants action to return to a traditional reporting ethic that disenfranchised consumers are now seeking. The disconnect between consumer demand and journalist content brings about questions of legitimacy within the free press that warrant democratic recourse to better establish reporter accountability within the state of the press.

The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media

Machine Learning in Media Networks

The social media network business model establishes its value in creating a network that assesses and employs user data in ways that best supports consumer engagement and promotes commerce. For example, in 2022 Meta received 113.6 billion US dollars (97% of its profits) in ad revenue. The network uses big data and machine learning to target the most persuadable audiences for a given product ad. Machine learning shares engagement, feedback, and purchases of a targeted audience to improve ad employment and user experience. A target audience can be categorized under multiple factors including: location, age, gender, language, demographic, interests, behaviors, or custom preference.

In recent years, Meta has updated its platforms for users to control their ad and news feed preferences. However, the preferences exercised by users news feeds eventually return to default settings established by its machine learning algorithms (Stacy Jo Dixon, 2023; Meta, 2023; Facebook, 2023). The lack of individual end-user control over personal networks warrant a greater inquiry into monopolist power abuses against end-users' networks. Though an effective business model, the use of machine learning to unknowingly provoke user engagement with limited access and personal influence on their own network prompts an applied patient-centered deontological ethic review.

Confirmation Bias and Media Networks

The relationship between machine learning and end-users should be thoughtfully reviewed when considering media that influences public opinion. As mentioned, social media networks actively leverage user behavior to provoke engagement. This inherently creates an inflammatory bias within networks that promotes a users' own public opinion and defames the opposition. This dynamic directly contradicts the news consumption patterns compulsory of a moderated public opinion. When combined with content sources that use advocacy journalism this network effect creates an echo-chamber within social media that makes moderate perspective development almost impossible. This places the responsibility of bias proliferation within social media networks and its polarizing effects directly on social media networks. At its best, this unchecked echo-chamber

is a national security risk that sews distrust within the press, disabling public opinion. At its worst, it is psychographic tool that threatens the legitimacy of US democratic elections.

Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, and US Democracy:

Cambridge Analytica came under the public spotlight in response to its involvement with Facebook's political advertising methods in the 2016 US presidential election. Cambridge Analytica, a subsidiary company of SCL Group before its bankruptcy on May 1, 2018, followed many of the practices developed within SCL Group. SCL group developed its business model around contracting out services in over 25 international electoral campaigns that influenced political operations, influenced public opinion, and influenced the political will of target audiences (Noujaim & Amer, 2019).

Cambridge Analytica, under the work of Aleksandr Kogan, harvested data of up to 87 million Facebook profiles. The data collected was used to develop psychological profiles on users and friends of users that engaged with an app called "This is your Digital Life" on the Facebook platform. The information collected was then employed for Donald Trump's political campaign under the campaign management firm Giles-Parscale's named "Project Alamo". The data analytics performed was used to locate persuadable audiences within swing states to engage in focused targeting to shift the outcome of the state to win the electoral college (Meredith, 2018; Noujaim & Amer, 2019). The major ethical concern within this practice was the employment of sensationalist advocacy journalism in overwhelming quantities targeted at influential populations without their knowing of its intended effects. Moreover, some media presented to these populations had limited basis of substantiated facts. These sorts of tools and the indiscriminatory oversight of network providers leaves major policy gaps for citizens to be influenced magnitudes beyond their control.

Conclusion

The state of reporting in journalism and echo chamber effects within social media presents clear ethical questions. There is a marked demand for an applied generational ethic to review advocacy journalism. The accountability failure in current reporting culture allows for inconsistent ethics to exist between journalists and subscribers. Journalists must reconcile the failures of advocacy journalism and its degenerative effect it has on public trust. Journalists must re-align their reporting methods within traditional reporting ethics subscribers demand of the press. Social

media networks are directly responsible for amplifying the effects of advocacy journalism and the existential threat it poses to a wholly informed public. There is a remarkable level of Constitutional protection of free speech within these practices, which requires academic, political, and judicial effort to address both advocacy journalism in reporting and echo-chamber network effect.

Aftermath of Cambridge Analytica

The greatest national security risk that exists within the marriage of advocacy journalism and social medias' echo-chambers is the risk of a compromised electoral process. The FTC issued an opinion finding that Cambridge Analytica, LLC engaged in deceptive practices to harvest personal information from Facebook users for voter profiling and targeting (Federal Trade Commission, 2019). These resolutions set forth the precedent that Facebook is subject to the regulations of the FTC when regarding how it collects and employs user data. However, it did not address the effect of echo chambers on social media platforms. This leaves a large level of discretion for social media platforms to self-regulate the machine learning algorithms that support polarizing advocacy journalism that proliferates on its platforms. Though there have been reforms in Facebook's self-regulation tools, improved community guidelines, and advertising standards, the network functions of its machine learning reasonably subdues these capabilities (Meta, 2023; Facebook, 2023).

The 2016 Presidential Election brought forth the vulnerabilities of laisse-faire oversight within social media platforms. There is a clear national security risk related to unaddressed echo chamber effects and funding sources on social media platforms. Though the FCC can regulate the journalism of hoaxes, news distortion, and political broadcasting of candidates for public office it is highly limited by First Amendment protections (Federal Communications Commission, 2021). This means any substantial progress in addressing "fake news" must come from the dissemination of free speech rather than speech itself. Additionally, there are steps that can be immediately taken to increase echo-chamber awareness as investigations are conducted in determining better corrective action on its existence. Bias metering tools like those established by allsides and adfontesmedia can be applied to users' network. User networks can be categorized to label the exact level of bias they are consuming; however, it doesn't ensure exposure to moderated points

of view. Networks algorithms, however, can be designed to incorporate news sources from an opposing point of view. This can be done through analogue request of user preferences and/or self-learning models.

Campaign Transparency and Political Accountability

Social media has become deeply interwoven within society. It has equal potential to become a tool of accountability for citizens as an influential tool for shaping public opinion in elections. The change in its use rests within the power dynamic of the network. The most obvious sign of disempowered citizenry within the political discourse is the over expenditure of public funds. A refocus of public opinion to examine public administrations function over political rhetoric will start to reshape the discourse within public opinion. After variations due to political exigencies is eliminated, an empirical focus can be placed on the state of progress at present capability relative to administrative capability. Upon this basis, quantity of services can be compared to the criteria of need, measurement of cost by criteria of ability, cost of social impact compared to concept of benefit, and the measurement of efficiency to the criteria of administrative aims (Waldo, 1948; Kilpatrick, 1936). Additionally, considering supreme court cases McCutcheon v FEC (2014) and Citizens United v FEC (2010) campaign financing ought to improve its transparency for citizens to better understand the alliances of their political candidates and media supporters. Algorithmic moderations in the news feed can supplement the due diligences required in consuming advocacy journalism without affecting free speech.

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