Efforts toward Unity amid Disinformation and Division in the United States

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Growing political polarization in the United States is obstructing cooperative effort. For example, despite the scientific consensus on climate change, "the existence and danger of global warming hasn't translated into government action" due to divisive disagreement about the issue (Collins, 2017). We are struggling to cross divides for even the gravest problems facing humanity. Extreme polarization is not new, but new causes of polarization are uniquely contributing to this today's political disunity. Throughout the late twentieth century, technological advances contributed to the decline of print media in favor of electronic media (Hilbert & Lopez, 2011). On virtual platforms in online media, people can connect, communicate, and learn from anywhere in the world, but the platforms can be abused. For example, foreign and domestic disruptors have weaponized social media as a tool for division, dividing American against American.

The extent and severity of this novel use for social media came much more to light leading up to and following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, in which Russia was found to have interfered. The Internet Research Agency, a Russian firm, employed a complex scheme to abuse social media with divisive posts, targeting certain belief groups with which the posts would resonate, and even pushed false information to cause disarray and division among Americans (Weise, 2017). Facebook estimates that about 126 million people had seen this "divisive material" the firm generated and distributed on the platform (Weise, 2017).

But social groups are resisting the online spread of divisive information and its resultant tribalism. Four primary groups are at work to halt this misuse: media groups are combatting the spread of disinformation on their platforms, for instance, prohibiting political ads; independent investigative journalists are disseminating factual information to allow individuals to make their own judgments based on evidence; activist groups are making efforts to bridge the divides by uniting individuals across them; and governmental bodies are introducing legislation to educate citizens and prevent future media misuse.

Review of Research

A review of scholarly work in this area supports the foundation of disinformation and its impacts to society. First, published scholarship indicates that the infection and spread of disinformation is a pervasive problem. In 2012, Lewandowsky et al. examined "the mechanisms by which such misinformation is disseminated in society," misinformation at the level of the individual, and the "cognitive factors that often render misinformation resistant to correction," providing a set of factors that explain the spread and perseverance of widespread false beliefs, such as the causal relationship between vaccinations and autism (p. 106). Vicario et al. (2016) conducted a "massive quantitative analysis of Facebook," and found that "information related to distinct narratives—conspiracy theories and scientific news—generates homogeneous and polarized communities (i.e., echo chambers) having similar information consumption patterns" (p.554). Other researchers have established how these underlying truths and methods are taken advantage of to sow division; investigating how social groups are resisting divisive information and these forces in the context of today's U.S. political climate is an extension of that research.

Researchers who have published works on parallel cases and efforts abroad lend importance to the research of efforts in the U.S. to combat division and disinformation. Bradshaw and Howard (2018) detail the broad global organization of social media disinformation campaigns, however do not examine efforts by nations to combat these campaigns and manipulation. Fiott and Parkes (2019) outlined the European Union response to combat disinformation, including "enhancing transparency about the origin of information," "supporting high quality journalism and media literacy with the aim of enhancing the diversity of information and critical thinking," and "boosting public awareness and media literacy" (p. 38). Berzina et al. (2019) further document European efforts, notably highlighting that "civil society and journalists have created dozens of fact-checking organizations all over Europe that seek to correct false or misleading information published online," and how several European countries "have launched anti-disinformation campaigns in schools" (pp. 8-9).

Examining scholarly work that other researchers have developed points to the breadth of ways that social groups combat disinformation. Schiffrin (2019) contends that artificial intelligence startups are emerging in a niche role in combatting disinformation and its spread, but notes the shortcomings in addressing the "larger economic, social, and political reasons that dis/misinformation spreads" (p. 11). Smith (2017) suggests "arming students against bad information" to combat divisive information and "fake news" using the 'CRAAP Test' (assessing currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose of information), though provides no documentation of domestic efforts following similar educational methods (p. 57). The research developed here supplements the efforts of groups documented by other researchers.

Social Media as a Mechanism for the Spread of Divisive Information

Social media is exacerbating political polarization and partisan division. In 2017 the Pew Research Center asked Americans where they read their online news in the last two hours: 36 percent reported a website or app of a news organization, while 35 percent reported social media (Mitchell et al., 2017). The study also revealed that follow-up actions such as "sharing, searching for more information or talking about it with others" were more likely when the news came through social media, as opposed to through a news organization's website or application (Mitchell et al., 2017). Social media is increasingly a primary source of news for Americans (Newman, 2017). This trend, however, provides an opportunity for malign actors to manipulate and mislead a large audience though these social media platforms.

Though convenient, social media can be misused in insidious ways to "distort election campaigns, affect public perceptions, or shape human emotions" (West, 2017). Propagandists use bots and disruptors on social media to cause division. With carefully selected keywords and interactions, they "magnify their influence and affect national or global conversations, especially resonating with like-minded clusters of people" (Vicario et al., 2016). Hence they exacerbate the "echo chambers" and "information cocoons" that social media encourages through confirmation bias (Vicario et al., 2016; Wason, 1960). People prefer to consult sources whose views align with their own, so far as to cause "suboptimal information-seeking decisions and errors in judgement" (Marks et al., 2019). Furthermore, once an individual accepts misinformation as truth, the belief is resistant to correction and "efforts to retract misinformation can even backfire and, ironically, increase misbelief," further worsening the damage of the infection and spread of misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Governments and political parties have recognized this utility of online media, and are "investing in the tools and techniques of computational propaganda in order to shape the

outcomes of elections, disrupt diplomatic efforts, and undermine peacebuilding efforts"

(Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p.7). Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, Cambridge

Analytica worked with the Trump Campaign and identified which voters were "most likely to be

persuadable" based on "personality profiles" constructed from personal data collected 50 million

Facebook users (Lapowsky, 2017; Detrow, 2018). With this information, the campaign could

target specific areas where they could pull most people to support Trump. The use of social

media for the manipulation and division of American citizens, though, even has foreign sources.

Following the investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election,

Facebook "estimated that as many as 150 million people were exposed to Russian propaganda

through fake accounts" on divisive issues "from gun rights to immigration and race relations"

(Wang, 2018). Twitter estimated that Russia-based accounts were responsible for "1.4 million

automated, election-related Tweets" that were viewed by "approximately 288 million Twitter

users" (Weise, 2017). The pervasiveness of these attacks and manipulation are cause for great

concern, and groups are acting to combat these efforts.

Resisting the Spread of Divisive Information

Online and social media companies themselves have responsibilities in the regulation and

spread of divisive information. In 2017, Google enhanced their search engine to, after a user's

search related to a public claim, "display information on the claim, who made the claim, and the

fact check of that particular claim" with hope that "people can make more informed judgements"

(Kosslyn & Yu, 2017). The fact checking employed for this feature is done independently from

Google, using fact checks only from "trusted [sources] of information" that are "algorithmically

determined to be an authoritative source of information" (Kosslyn & Yu, 2017). Facebook, in

early 2018, announced a multi-part strategy to reduce the spread of misinformation on their

platform. It collaborates with third-party fact-checkers that are "independent and certified

through the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network" and work to "review and rate the

accuracy of articles and posts" on the platform (Lyons, 2018). However, posts marked false by

these organizations are not removed; instead Facebook "[ranks] those stories significantly lower

in News Feed … [cutting] future views by more than 80 percent" (Lyons, 2018). Facebook,

though, has been inconsistent in accepting responsibility for content posted on its site. In a May

2018 hearing before two Senate committees, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg states Facebook

is not a publisher or media company, and instead is simply a tech company with no journalistic

responsibilities (PBS NewsHour, 2018; Levin, 2018). Only months later, Facebook attorneys

argue it is in fact a publisher that makes editorial decisions (Levin, 2018). Some believe

Facebook is hesitant to claim a role as a publisher or media company, "due to stricter laws and

regulations outside of the US that could cause the company trouble" (Levin, 2018). It is unclear

where Facebooks true motives lie in the management of content on its platform.

In an interview with NBC News, Reddit CEO Steve Huffman explained the organization

took precautions "to deal with foreign efforts to push misinformation on the site ahead of the

midterm elections," as well as bolstered their efforts to stop foreign influence campaigns on the

platform (Kent, Barrett, & Cappetta, 2018). Twitter has announced a ban on political ads on the

platform to prevent "unchecked misleading information," as political ads "bring significant risks

to politics" (Dorsey, 2019). These online media companies are acting through a variety of means

to limit the misuse of their platforms in the spread of misinformation.

Other media companies such as MSNBC and CNN, as well as NPR members, have very

recently acted to stop the spread of misinformation. In response the developing novel

coronavirus pandemic, the White House holds regular briefings to update the public on the state of the emerging crisis. In one such press briefing, President Trump boasted chloroquine, traditionally a malaria medicine, as a treatment for the novel coronavirus, leading to the death of an elderly man after he sought out and took an unsafe version of the chemical (Grove & Tani, 2020). This case highlights the potentially devastating consequences of misinformation. Rachel Maddow, MSNBC anchor, "called for news networks to stop carrying President Trump's statements live" because "the president's daily comments contribute to the spread of misinformation" (Grove & Tani, 2020). CNN insiders, too, have recognized that broadcasting President Trumps statements live "likely amplifies the spread of misinformation about the disease and its potential cure" (Grove & Tani, 2020). One method CNN has begun to use to mitigate the President's potential to spread misinformation is to break away, interrupting their coverage in favor of broadcasting more factual content (Bauder, 2020). NPR station KUOW released a statement about its stance on live White House Coronavirus briefings, reemphasizing their mission "to create and serve a more informed public" (KUOW Staff, 2020). In accordance with that mission, they elected to stop airing the White House briefings on the pandemic live due to the challenges of fact-checking statements in real-time, and in recognition that "the potential impact of false information on the health and safety of our community" is far too severe (KUOW Staff, 2020).

Fact-checking organizations such as Snopes and PolitiFact fight misinformation through research and by reporting information and evidence unadulterated by political bias, with the hope that "readers are empowered to do independent research and make up their own minds" (Snopes 2020). PolitiFact publishes articles to "give citizens the information they need to govern themselves in a democracy" (Holan, 2018). FactCheck.org "aims to reduce the level of deception

and confusion in U.S. politics" by monitoring the "factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players" (FactCheck.org, 2020). Though these efforts are indirect and leave the root cause untouched, they empower individuals to make their own judgments.

Governmental bodies are acting to combat the issue more directly. In 2017, Congress introduced the Honest Ads Act which "expands source disclosure requirements for political advertisements" and "requires online platform companies to maintain publicly available records about qualified political advertisements that have been purchased on their platforms" (Honest Ads Act, 2017). In addition, Congress introduced the Secure America from Russian Interference Act of 2018, which "sets forth provisions for countering specified subversive activities by the Russian Federation against the United States and U.S. allies" (Secure America from Russian Interference, 2018). State governments are making efforts as well. For example, Washington, in a bipartisan effort, passed a bill requiring its State School Directors' Association to "create a web-based location with links to recommended successful practices and resources to support digital citizenship, media literacy, and internet safety" in 2017 (S.B. 5449, 2017). California state government passed a law that requires the State Department of Education "to make available … a list of resources and instructional materials on media literacy" by July 1, 2019 (S.B. 830, 2018). In 2019, Virginia introduced House Bill 1978 which sought to support "the digital citizenship, Internet safety, and media literacy of all students and teachers in the local school division" (H.B. 1978, 2019). Dozens of other states have similarly acted in media-literacy improving efforts (Media Literacy Now, 2019). These groups, by arming citizens with awareness and media literacy in addition to imposing transparency requirements, act against the spread of disinformation.

Building Bridges

Many social groups are striving to unite individuals across partisan divides, though their exact motives and methods differ. Bridge Alliance (2019) contends that "civil discourse is necessary for genuine problem-solving to address our great challenges." Bridge Alliance holds member conferences at which members seek ways to promote of constructive collaboration, strong voices for citizens, civil discourse, and mutual support (Bridge Alliance, 2019). For example, Better Angels, a member of the Bridge Alliance, is hosting a workshop in February 2020 inviting seven conservative-leaning citizens and seven liberal-leaning citizens to "understand the experiences and beliefs of those on the other side … find any areas of common ground" and "learn anything that might be helpful to our nation" (Better Angels, 2020). Meanwhile, No Labels (2019) is "fed up with the dysfunction" of political stalemate. No Labels inspired the formation of the Problem Solvers Caucus, a bloc of congressional Democrats and Republicans "committed to working together to solve the challenges facing [the] country" (No Labels, 2019). Additionally, No Labels sponsors bicameral, bipartisan meetings in Washington the first Wednesday of every month, calling on citizens to encourage their representatives to "meet, negotiate, and try to forge solutions" (No Labels, 2019).

Unite America, like No Labels, seeks to end political stalemate. Unite America (2020) has a three-pillar strategy to combat current political dysfunction: increase (1) competition and (2) participation to improve governing incentives, and increase (3) accountability to have better leadership (Unite America, 2020). The organization argues we must "put the public interest ahead of any partisan or special interest" (Unite America, 2020). With the help of its philanthropic and nonpartisan donor community, Unite America "invest[s] in nonpartisan electoral reform campaigns in order to foster a more functional and representative government,"

for example by eliminating partisan gerrymandering (Unite America, 2020). Gerrymandering "reinforces and exacerbates the tribal wars between the parties" (National Public Radio, 2015). Unite America argues that for this reason, among others, elected representatives "fear their own parties' political extremes" and thus "have been discouraged from working across the aisle to find solutions" (Unite America, 2020).

RepresentUs focuses specifically on bringing "conservatives and progressives together to pass Anti-Corruption acts in cities and states across America" (RepresentUs, 2020a). The organization and its members wish to stop political bribery, end secret money, and reform election processes so ordinary citizens more in control of the direction of the nation. RepresentUs "helped to pass 23 anti-corruption reforms across the nation" in 2018 (RepresentUs, 2020a). In 2019, RepresentUs released a short film starring Jennifer Lawrence that "breaks down the ways in which the political system is no longer working … and how we can fix this massive political breakdown" (RepresentUs, 2020b). In the related press release, the organization explained its campaign to "host viewings and discussions in six major cities across the country" and to "work with schools to show the short film in classrooms to engage young Americans on how they can fight for and protect their political power and influence" (RepresentUs, 2020b).

Conclusion

Social groups are acting, in some cases collaborative or overlapping ways, to unify in the face of disinformation and division. Groups such as Bridge Alliance, Unite America, and others have formed civic coalitions for the uniting of people across partisan divides, in which citizens themselves are driving the movements and efforts. Online media and technology companies are taking preventative action against the spread of divisive information on their platforms using

sophisticated algorithms, in addition to banning certain types of content. Governmental bodies are mitigating the impacts of misinformation by imposing information transparency requirements to the online media and technology companies, as well as by investing in educational initiatives to inform the public and its youth. Fact-checking organizations, sometimes in collaboration with online media companies, are disseminating factual evaluation of information to further empower individuals to form their own judgements and reduce deception in politics. This web of interaction and collaboration among these groups serves to combat the issues of division and disinformation at multiple fronts.

In response to threats to truth and democracy in disinformation and cross-party dysfunction, social groups across the social and political spectrum mobilize to put aside partisan differences for mutual benefit. It remains to be seen, and is worthy of further investigation, if these efforts prove successful in combatting division amid mis- and disinformation so widespread today. Useful next steps include applying the strategies of the aforementioned groups and measuring outcomes specifically as related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, best practices being employed by these groups, such as information transparency, fact-checking, and election reform, can lend themselves to agreeing recommendations, improvements, and policy innovations.

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