

“Question everything.” Is this fair advice when approaching the media today?

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The media as we know it today is made available to us in more forms than ever before, comprising more traditional outlets like television and radio, as well as other forms of new media such as the internet and social media sites. The diversity of media sources and unparalleled ability to create and access media today enables it to have a huge influence on daily life. I believe that it is fair and wise advice to coat our interactions with the media with a pinch of salt, and question both the reliability and likelihood of the content that the media presents to us. I believe that whilst doing so may be seen as overly cautious by some, it is imperative to ensure that we are not susceptible to misinformation and manipulation by media sites and those who fund them.

With the advent of the internet and the popularization of online media sites as a primary distributor of content and information, due largely to their ability to capture an international audience and following, there is just reason for us to be more cautious of the content that we are exposed to. The rise of the internet as a key medium by which media content propagates means that individuals now have a greater ability than before to engage in content creation, as there are fewer regulations that can be placed online as compared to more traditional news agencies. The vastness of the internet, and its less tangible and physical nature, makes it more challenging for governments to regulate and monitor its operations. The online platform is thus largely self-regulatory, and there are fewer checks on the reliability of information.

Apparent in the recent elections in the US and Brexit referendum in the UK is the ability of the media to misrepresent information in a way that causes misinformation of the masses. Fake news, a term used to refer to unreliable or even factually untrue news sources, have been on the rise. This phenomenon is enabled by the internet and the ability it gives these unreliable content creators to create content that appears as professional and legitimate as other news sources. In the US, unreliable and clearly un-objective media outlets such as that of Breitbart, a news platform run by the alt-right, has published content disparaging Muslims and immigrants with blatantly untrue statistics about crime rates and the ability of these communities to disrupt and damage American society. Whilst untrue, these statistics are presented in an extremely believable manner, with diagrams and infographics similar to actual government sources.

To “question everything” would be to approach such content discerningly, and to evaluate both the reliability of the source as well as the how realistic the information they are providing is. To take the media today at face value without questioning or checking the information provided makes us extremely susceptible to misinformation. This misinformation can come at a high cost to us, as it influences our decision making and potentially even the way we vote. This was observed in the UK following the results of the Brexit referendum, where there was massive public outcry upon learning that the “facts” and “statistics” about UK’s contribution to the European Union has been misrepresented to the public. To be discerning towards the media content that we are exposed to is an important way to guard ourselves against misinformation that can hurt our personal wellbeing. It is thus reasonable that as individuals we question everything that the media throws our way.

Even the traditional media outlets, which may appear to carry a veneer of legitimacy when pit against online media providers and unregulated content creators, should not be blindly accepted. The media industry is one that is highly competitive and lucrative, and as a business venture, are

often profit motivated. It is widely known that media agencies and conglomerates accept private and corporate funding to maintain their operations. Be it politicians who own a stake in media firms or large multinational corporations that invest in these media outlets, all have the ability to influence the media and its presentation of information. This results in media sites carrying their own biases in their presentation of information. If left unquestioned and trusted wholly, it has the ability to skew understandings and perspectives of viewers.

News agencies like Fox News have been known to have a conservative slant, made apparent during political debates and their perhaps too encouraging reporting of Donald Trump's actions. Viewers who subscribe to these media channels are thus fed one-sided and biased information about the events in their country. This causes them to act in ways that can potentially hurt them at the polls, and potentially instill in them beliefs founded on untruths. Corporate involvement in media agencies can be even more problematic, as the media is used as a tool to forward their own corporate agendas. ExxonMobil was infamous for using skewed media reports to downplay the role of human action and fossil fuels in global warming. This was done to retain the American public's support for the use of coal and fossil fuels, so as to raise ExxonMobil's own bottom line. The perspective that the media provides its viewers is extremely coercive, especially since viewers attain most of their information from a single source and accept the information unquestioningly. It is thus important advice to give to the 21st century audience to be perspective and evaluate the media that we are exposed to, either by fact checking or simply exposing ourselves to more than one source of information.

Those who disagree may argue that it is overly cautious and unfair for viewers to be told to "question everything", as it may be unfeasible and content is not always certainly unreliable. Proponents of such a view argue that not all the media sites today are unreliable, and that to question every piece of information would be too troublesome due to the sheer volume of content that we are exposed to. They believe that it would be more reasonable to suggest that we question the information only when there is reason to do so, such as facts that are hard to believe or that appear extreme and have the potential to create harm.

Even then, I still believe that there is great value in questioning every piece of information as this is the only foolproof way to prevent misinformation, even if it requires more time spent. In the digital age we are living in, it is understandable that instant gratification and access to information is of value, but I believe that the benefit of such convenience and ease can only materialise if the information is reliable, and can enable individuals to have a better understanding of the issues around them and make better decisions. The problem with only questioning what appears blatantly untrue or hard to believe is twofold: firstly, even fake news is oftentimes done skillfully and presented in a palatable manner. But more importantly, intrinsic biases are often a part of the reason that we are susceptible to fake news in the first place.

As fake news often appears equally legitimate and professionally done because it seeks to persuade and deceive readers into believing its narrative, it would be hard to find blatant and suspicious content. As such, the only way to sieve out such false information is to check and question all content, regardless of how legitimate and probable it may appear to be. More importantly, relying on one's intuition to identify misinformation is extremely challenging, and unlikely to yield much success in ensuring that we are able to properly evaluate media content.

Often times, misinformation occurs to the greatest and most harmful extent when it reinforces certain beliefs that we already hold, or that appeal to our innate fears and motivations. This oftentimes include playing on inherent racial stereotypes and divisions to incite fear amongst individuals. The reason why Americans living in coal cities bought into the belief that immigrants were stealing American jobs more than Americans living in more affluent areas was due to the fact that the poor unemployed coal miners viewed unemployment as a more pressing concern, one that affected their everyday life and the wellbeing of their communities. As such, misinformation that plays on such biases and fears are usually the most persuasive. In light of the nature of unreliable content and its ability to manipulate the human mind to appear legitimate and appealing, we must ensure that we are discerning to all media content, to be able to identify which is reliable and which isn't.

The clout that the media has over our access to information, and the beliefs and perspectives we gain from this information, has only grown with the propagation of media content on the internet. In its larger variety and harder to regulate form, I believe that it is only reasonable that we do everything in our means to guard against misinformation. We should capitalize on the variety of sources available to us to ensure that we are more informed individuals, and that we are accurately informed ones. I feel that to not be weary and take the information the media throws at us at face value would be to be informed, but blindly. To be blindly informed is worse than not being informed at all, as we would then be knowingly making bad decisions that may hurt our own well being. As such, I believe that it is not only reasonable but also extremely wise advice that we view the media with a pair of scrutinizing and discerning eyes, to ensure that we are able to access information that is factual and objective, so as to enable us to shape our understanding and opinions of the world around us and prevent the grave consequences of misinformed decisions.

Comments:

While you have raised some valid issues and provided sound insights, the paragraphing can be better. Your paragraphs are too long. The use of supporting evidence can be more consistent as well. The penultimate paragraph felt rushed.

