Nip misinformation in the bud

The democratization of journalism through crowd sourcing, blogging, and social media has proven to be a sharp, double-edged sword. The internet has vastly expanded the sourcing of news and information, capturing stories that might otherwise go untold and delivering a diversity of perspectives that no single media outlet could hope to offer. At the same time, this new and open model has given anyone with web access a global platform to propagate information that is mistakenly or intentionally false. This is especially problematic when it comes to scientific information, which is critical to rational policy-making in areas like health, environmental protection, and national security, and at its best is often misinterpreted by the lay public. Yet recent years have seen a reduction in specialized science pages and reporters in the nation’s newsrooms in favor of reliance on general assignment staffers, even as deadlines have grown shorter—reducing opportunities to ensure accuracy and clarity before publication.

Postpublication fact checking is helping. From the “Pinocchios” that the Washington Post awards to those caught stretching the truth, to the day-to-day debunkings posted by organizations like FactCheck, Snopes, and PolitiFact, the recent explosion in fact-checking initiatives is a welcome response to this bubbling new environment. But memes take root quickly and die hard. So, in the fight against misinformation, fact checking is often too little, too late. When it comes to stories about science—or about legislation, economics, or other domains where science can be informative—it would be far better to help journalists and the public get it right before having to call in the truth squads.

The good news is that at major gatherings, such as the recent annual meeting of the Online News Association in Washington, DC, and the World Conference of Science Journalists, convening today in San Francisco, reporters, producers, and scientists are increasingly talking about this need for enhanced communication. Moreover, a number of diverse organizations, including the Royal Society, the Wellcome Trust, and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, are experimenting with new models for bolstering science journalism, as is the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, the publisher of Science). Just today, AAAS launched a new such endeavor called “SciLine,” a free service that provides timely access to articulate scientific experts for journalists and other communicators who cover science-related issues. In the weeks and months ahead, SciLine will also offer clear, accessible summaries explaining the methods and experimental evidence behind newsworthy scientific advances. And it will gather and release on-the-record, insightful, contextual comments from researchers and scholars on issues in public discourse for which the relevant science can be informative—all for use by time-stressed reporters and others before they file their stories.

In my recent experience leading strategic communications about advanced technologies in the U.S. Department of Defense, I learned that wargamers deeply understand the value of preventing errors, as compared to having to undo them. When strategizing, they talk about “left of boom” and “right of boom”—the time before and after a violent event or the start of a war—with “left of boom” being rich in options for avoiding crisis and “right of boom” being a much more difficult time when the best one can hope for is a least-bad outcome. The societal costs of scientific misunderstanding—and the resources wasted trying to correct misimpressions about, say, vaccines or climate change—may not be comparable to those involved in preventing or undoing a war, but they are of no small consequence. With the risks posed by misinformation rising every day, I encourage everyone in the scientific community to consider how they can cultivate the opportunity space that is, to paraphrase the wargamers, “left of wrong.”

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