

Online nonsense: tools and teaching to combat fake news on the Web

Session for Interaction and Engagement, proposed for I-Conference 2019

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Abstract:

How can we raise the quality of what we find on the Web? What software might we build, what education might we try to provide, and what procedures (either manual or mechanical) might be introduced? What are the technical and legal issues that limit our responses? The speakers will suggest responses to problems, and we'll ask the audience what they would do in specific circumstances.

Description:

Purpose: Our goal is to collect ideas for how to reduce the amount of error and nonsense online, including in search results and social media. Our desired audience is researchers in the use of new communications technology.

Proposed activities: After an initial discussion of what is done today and what has been tried, we intend to challenge the audience by presenting specific cases. Here are some of the examples we might present to the audience to see what they would suggest:

- A young man who developed cancer searched on Baidu, was directed to a non-standard treatment provider, did not go to an conventional oncologist, and died. His family is now suing Baidu.
- A man who had read false postings about children being kept hostage in the basement of a Washington pizza restaurant (Comet Ping Pong) drove from North Carolina and shot the place up.
- Childhood vaccination rates are declining in some areas, and the number of cases of whooping cough went from 1,000 in 1976 to 48,000 in 2012. Bots are spewing both pro- and anti-vaccination information, and unfortunately even giving people the right information doesn't help (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/02/25/peds.2013-2365>).
- *The Promise*, a movie about the Armenian genocide, was shown three times at a Toronto film festival in September 2016 in an auditorium with 900 seats. Before it was otherwise available in any form, people who denied the existence of the genocide downrated the movie with 55,000 1-star reviews on IMDB (almost none from Canada).
- In 1913 a man shouted "Fire" falsely during a Christmas party at a hall in Calumet, Michigan; 73 people died in the resulting stampede. This is the background for Justice Holmes' famous opinion that the First Amendment would not protect a man shouting fire in a crowded theater.

Those old enough may remember that "citizens band" radio, an earlier favorite medium where anyone could say anything, became useless as a result of too much obscenity. Could the same thing happen to social media? (And would that be good or bad)?

We will prepare a summary of what we learn from the session and provide it for the conference website.

Relevance and significance: Given the heavy reliance on the web for information, we would like to get better information to people, particularly young people who are still developing their skills for evaluating what they read. This will be critical for our educational and political future, and we need better ways to raise the quality and accuracy of what we see online.

In 1898 the battleship *Maine* sank in Havana harbor, and William Randolph Hearst used the tragedy to whip up sentiment for a war. Famously, when the artist Frederic Remington said Cuba was peaceful and he wanted to come home, Hearst wrote back “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.” Not quite a century later Admiral Rickover led an inquiry which concluded that the ship had simply caught fire.

How do we deal with online fakery, from medicine to climate to politics? Do we need software, staff, or education? Information scientists will need to both develop and apply the necessary tools and methods.

Duration:

90 minutes (one session).