News and Online Content in the Fight Against Fake News

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Abstract. the effects of media on political knowledge have been an interest for many scholars (e.g. Cho & McLeod, 2007; Roberts, 2000; Shah, Kwak & Schmierbach, 2000). Political participation, which is a reflection of political knowledge, is a cornerstone for democracy (Mayer, 2011). Prior to the internet, citizens formed their political opinions and based democratic decisions primarily on information provided by the conventional media (newspaper, radio and television news). The emergence of new media and communication technologies empowers citizens not only to read information, but to produce content as well (Melkote & Steeves, 2014). This new function in the media has led to mass amounts of information, some of which is accurate and some of which is not. These new outlets do not undermine the importance of traditional media, they offer ways for consumers to expand the communication range (Woodly, 2008). Of specific interest to this paper is the new media as an alternative to conventional media. Some scholars have criticized the epistemological merits of the new media on grounds that it reduces accuracy of public opinion (Goldman, 2008) while others have argued that it does not have this effect but may actually *improve* accuracy of public opinion (Coady, 2011).

This paper focuses on David Coady's argument in his article "An Epistemic Defense of the Blogosphere. As we will see, the main flaw in David Coady's case is that his central arguments are drawn through examining the collective content of the new media versus the collective content of the conventional media. This article argues that the collective contents tell us almost nothing about whether the internet actually improves the accuracy of public opinion. This article also argues that the virtues of the new media depend on the conventional media, so any value brought forth by it can be traced back to conventional media. Therefore, as the new media grows and the conventional media shrinks, much of the value of the internet diminishes. Ultimately this will lead to a less informed public.

Filtering and Virtuous News

Goldman (2008) emphasizes the importance of filtering the news. Filtering involves a gatekeeper, which is a third party that decides what information will be published and which will not. The filtering process, that Goldman (2008) emphasizes, is important in order to promote more accurate public knowledge.

Goldman (2008) argues that the new media is unfiltered, which threatens the accuracy of public knowledge. His view on news and information is that conventional media is necessary in order for the public to make informed decisions:

It is the responsibility of reporters and editors to seek and publish the truth about matters of state

because, as argued above, citizens' knowing the truth is crucial to their making correct decisions (correct as judged by their own desired *rata*). For the acquisition of knowledge to occur, it isn't sufficient that there be a free press that publishes or broadcasts the relevant truths. It is equally critical that members of the public receive and believe those truths. If truths are published but not read, or published and read but not believed, the public won't possess the information (or knowledge) that is important for making correct decisions. (Goldman, 2008, p. 112)

Goldman's primary concern is the accuracy of public knowledge as it is a significant part of democracy. Coady doesn't deny Goldman's argument that receipt and belief of valid information is necessary—his argument is that the new media enhances this by vastly expanding the amount of available information. It is not just the content of information that is Coady's main argument but rather, the belief that the new media actually contains more accurate content than does the conventional media because while conventional media has the right idea (reporting truth), it does so almost to a fault through its process of filtering, whereby editors sort through information, taking out what they deem inappropriate and publishing only select information. Journalists and editors sort through information in an attempt to expose what is accurate and eliminate what is false. Coady is concerned that while this is a noble idea, the process is imperfect and inevitably some true information gets filtered out along with the false. He states that "The blogosphere includes many more reports than the conventional media. Inevitably the new media reports falsehoods that the conventional media filters out, but equally inevitably it also reports truths that the conventional media filters out." As a result, readers get a version of the news that is partly true but that could be missing vital parts that were inadvertently filtered out. For Coady, the

new media is a remedy for this in that it can pick up the pieces that the conventional media left out and while some might report incorrectly, the public is capable of sorting through this themselves and ultimately are in a better position to determine what is true and what is not. He goes on to argue that "Excessive concern with falsehood avoidance is an epistemic vice. It is a form of epistemic timidity or incuriosity. People who confine themselves to a filtered medium may well avoid falsehoods (if the filters are working well), but inevitably they will also miss out on valuable knowledge." The problem with Coady's argument is that the only way for readers to truly receive this plethora of valuable knowledge and to piece together the full story, is for them to access and consume literally *all* available information. If what Coady says is true and the new media allows for an unfiltered medium where readers can consume all aspects of a story, then they must be sure to read all of it, otherwise they are at risk for the very thing that Coady says is an epistemic vice—not receiving enough accurate information. If we consider the difference in the value of the knowledge one would receive if they spent ten hours reading the new media or ten hours reading or watching conventional media, it would be difficult to defend the new media as superior because, as will be explained in more detail later, that what people choose to read is often based on existing beliefs, views or even for entertainment. Consequently, they may be consuming biased information or only one version of the story. On the other hand, if one spends ten hours consuming conventional media they are likely reading through a consolidated version of the story; a set of facts presented to the reader which has been filtered through to ensure accuracy in order to facilitate their understanding of the issue.

Coady (2011) argues that filtering eliminates some truth along with the false that it eliminates. But if some truth is lost through filtering then surely one can see that some (or

much) truth is lost through not hearing all sides of any story before making a judgment about it. One could consider, like Goldman, the analogy of the American court system. The receivers of information are the jurors and the communicators are the disputing parties and their legal counsel with the judge acting as gatekeeper (filter) over the exchange of information presented to the jurors. The judge filters information including who is allowed to testify as witness, what evidence can be shown to the jury and what type of rebuttals can be presented. Not only is this process widely accepted, but arguably necessary, in order for any jury to come up with a sound verdict. Coady (2011) states:

Goldman is right that the filtering practices of the common-law court system are rarely criticized on these grounds. But it is not immediately obvious what this has to do with the epistemic issues that are Goldman's professed concern. (Coady, 2011, p. 278)

The answer to Coady's question of epistemic issue here is that citizens cannot read all the information in the new media, therefore, although Coady's argument is for valuable knowledge to be protected, unless the reader hears all sides of the news, there is a chance of reading errors and making a bad political decision based on it. The new media can only protect against this if there were a way for the entirety of what it contains to be absorbed or if Coady is only taking into account only the ideal readers who are curious, critical thinkers, open-minded, know how to fact check and someone who has an infinite time.

The court and juror example shows how the judge is filtering all the information presented to the jury to promote truth and eliminate error because there are standards for what evidence/information is shown to the jury. Information that has been compromised for example cannot be shown or statements that are not sworn in under oath cannot be heard. The jurors are also forced to hear both sides of the

argument and listen to all of the evidence. If the new media consumers could assess all the information available, then that would increase the chances that reader could process the information and make a better assessment. Again Coady repeated error appears in his interpretation of the court-juror example, he argues that the process of filtering filters out errors as well as some truths that are not verified, therefore he claims that the new media contains more errors as well as more truths but he also believes that citizens are capable of sorting out their news and knowing what truth is and what is not.

Goldman's assumption that consumers of information are entirely passive in the face of what they are told may have been more acceptable when people had to rely on a limited range of filtered sources for their news. But because of the Internet, many people have access to a range of news sources, saying mutually incompatible things. As a result they are able to develop their critical faculties, which in turn helps them make better choices about what and whom to believe. This is a good thing from an epistemic point of view as well as from the point of view of their general wellbeing. (Coady, 2011, p. 291)

Coady (2011) argues that allowing readers to filter information themselves is good for their developmental wellbeing and critical thinking skills and that it gives them more access to truth but this requires that they have read all or far more than typical amounts of information in the new media. If they have not done so (which is likely the case) readers are still in danger of having either read false information or having *not* read some valuable piece that might have changed their opinion. Coady's argument suggest that the collective information in the new media contains more truth than the collective information in the conventional media, which could be true. However, Coady does not explain how this this lead to more informed public.

Filtering and Balance

Coady (2011) claims that Goldman's example (court-jury) confines issues to two sides while sometimes there are more than two sides to a story, which could be inadvertently filtered out in the conventional media. Coady's error appears again in his interpretation of the court-jury example but from the perspective of balance, the coverage of all sides of a story. Coady (2011) denies that Goldman's example of the court and jury is representative of all news due to the limitation of it being two sided: In fact, Goldman's analogy with the Anglo-American trial system, so far from giving us a reason to prefer the conventional media to the internetosphere, does just the opposite.

There are exactly two sides to every case put before a jury in the Anglo-American legal system. The jury may decide for one party or for the other, or (in some cases) decide that the correct answer lies somewhere between the contending positions. But it is clearly a mistake to think that there are precisely two sides to every political issue. Sometimes there are more (i.e. there are more than two positions supported by some of the available evidence) and sometimes there are fewer (i.e. there is only one position supported by the available evidence). (Coady, 2011, p. 282)

As mentioned earlier, this example reflects that jurors are forced to be exposed to all the evidence from both sides. It is not about the two sides itself. It is two sides in the example because of the nature of court proceedings being between two parties. Furthermore, because of the two party American political system, most political arguments tend to have two sides. That doesn't mean that every issue only has two sides though and this isn't what Goldman is implying. The point is, no matter how many sides to a story, it is vital for all sides to be heard in order for the listener to make an informed judgment. The difficulty here in terms of Coady's argument is that in order for this to occur, the reader must read a very diverse

sample of the information available in the new media. With conventional media there is at least two sides to every story though this is usually only two based on the nature of the American political system but with the new media there is only one side—the preferred side of the internet news producer user and, consequently the reader who selected this internet as a “favorite” because it likely coincides with pre-existing views. This isn't to say conventional media is the perfect solution for this either, but when readers are relying on the new media for their source of information they must be sure to expose themselves to all sides of a story, even those that go against their pre-existing biases.

Filtering and Professionalism

The new media depends greatly on volunteers, compared to the traditional media that depends on professional paid journalists that are required to provide news that meets rigorous requirements (Lacy, Duffy, Riffe, Thorson, & Fleming, 2010). People now are shaping their knowledge and basing their decisions on information wrote by “random lunatics riffing in their underwear, rather than professional journalists with standards and passports (Kinsley, 2006, p. 1).” Bloggers believe that they are an extension to traditional media and they provide comparable values to the traditional news media (Tomaszeski, Proffitt, & McClung, 2009). As a source of information, Goldman supports the superiority of conventional media over the new media in that it is filtered through to ensure balanced and accurate information is presented. This can be done best by professional editors and reporters because they are guided by a set of rules and regulations that enforce the quality and the accuracy of the news.

Newspapers employ fact checkers to vet a reporter's article before it is published. They often require more than a single source before publishing an article, and limit reporters' reliance on anonymous sources. These practices seem likely to raise the veritistic

quality of the reports newspapers publish and hence the veritistic quality of their readers' resultant beliefs. At a minimum, they reduce the number of errors that might otherwise be reported and believed. Thus, from a veritistic point of view, filtering looks promising indeed. Isn't that an argument for the superiority of the conventional news media over blogging, so long as knowledge and error-avoidance are the ends being considered? (Goldman, 2008, p. 117)

The purpose of these professionals is that they can sort through the information for the reader and consolidate it into something that is feasible to read and understand. Repeatedly, Coady's error appears in his response to Goldman's argument for journalism as a profession. Coady (2011) argues that this notion is contradictory to the aim of democracy.

The idea that seeking and publicising political truth should be left to a professionally accredited body of experts is as inimical to the ideals of democracy as the idea of leaving voting itself to such a class. Indeed it is striking that the starting point of Goldman's argument, the epistemic approach to democracy (i.e. the claim that democracy is superior to other systems of government in its ability to 'track the truth'), appears so clearly inconsistent with his elitist conclusion about the public's inability to sort through unfiltered information on its own. If people without the proper accreditation really cannot be relied on to distinguish truth from falsehood about political matters, why should we suppose that they can be relied on to identify and vote for the right candidate (or even the candidate who is 'right for them')? (Coady, 2011, p. 281)

Again, the issue with this argument is that it still leaves the reader to their own devices in terms of collecting information and unless they have read and understand all of the information available to them, they are still not making an informed decision. Aside from having the ability to read the entirety of the new media

(because as was mentioned before, we cannot expect readers to consume *all* of conventional media either, but what they do get has more than one side of the story) the issue here is that readers will tend to gravitate toward information that coincides with their pre-existing ideas and beliefs. While conventional media has a buffer against this through regulations, the new media does not so the reader cannot know if what they are reading is based on fact or based on the internetger's personal opinion or as Goldman (2008) stated "Bad people find one another in cyberspace and gain confidence in their crazy ideas." The majority of bloggers (72%) consider themselves "hobbyists" who write for personal satisfaction (Schmierbach & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2012). They are mainly advocates of particular political issues that support their subjective ideologies which reflects on the news they produce (Baum & Groeling, 2008). Bloggers tend to write mainly about subjects that they are passionate about (Gomez, 2005), so the news will differ depending on the motives and the level of passion of the writer. Political blogs could be comparable to particular sections in traditional newspapers such as opinion columnists (Leccese, 2009). This function in the new news media accelerates polarization by furthering the divide between political values (Meyer, 2009; Xenos, 2008). The production of the enormous amount of different versions of the same story makes it difficult for readers to know if whether or not what they are reading in the new media is accurate. Studies have shown that readers are inclined to news that supports their beliefs and prejudices. Haidt's (2013) findings show that we are inclined toward information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs. In addition, Kahan (2013) studies show that who we consider to be an expert coincides with our ideological beliefs. For example, if I am a Democrat I will most likely refer to Democratic advocates on issues over Republican or Libertarian because I relate to

them and they can confirm what I already believe. Readers will pick and choose which blogs to follow, thus they are doing their own 'filtering,' but of information that cannot be confirmed or validated. That does not mean the new media is bad or inferior in all cases-- the new media could be superior in social change and empowerment but less so in regards to news reporting and its effect on the accuracy of public knowledge. Goldman (2008) states:

Editors and journalists are motivated by their jobs and careers to perform well, and this doesn't change with the political wind. Blogging isn't a career, so the volume and intensity of blogging activity is more dependent on political drive, which is, plausibly, a more variable matter. (Goldman, 2008, p. 121)

Goldman (2008) states that filtering could happen by the receiver or the sender of the information and if we accept Coady's premise that the public is capable of differentiating between truth and falsehood in the new media, then it is still difficult for the reader to differentiate—especially when they are only consuming select information from the new media. Goldman argues that if the reader is unable to filter due to inability to read the entire blogosphere, then it is important for the source to filter it and that is why professional journalism is important. Furthermore, as Coady (2011) argues that filtering is unnecessary, what he doesn't acknowledge is that when readers choose which blogs to read they more or less doing their own filtering and it is, inevitably, based on pre-conceived ideas and beliefs, as they will tend to read blogs that fall in line with them. The conventional media, its journalists and news reports follow rigorous filtering procedures that promote knowledge and avoid error. This procedure could filter out unverified information but this is for the sake of striving to provide knowledge to the citizens that might help in making informed democratic decisions.

The Threat of the New Media

The new media's impact on the traditional news media is vicious; it contributed to the layoff of around 6000 journalists in 2008; closing of The Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the Rocky Mountain news; bankruptcies or near bankruptcies of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, the Philadelphia Inquirer, Canwest and the Giant Tribune Company; along with the decline of newspapers sales revenue in general. Scholars and journalists are worried about the future of journalism and the possible impact its demise would have on democracy (McChesney & Nicols, 2011; Mersey, 2010). Some scholars such as Goldman (2008) believe that the new media is piggybacking on the conventional media and providing the news at almost no cost. The point to be learned is that we cannot compare the new media and the conventional news outlets as two wholly independent and alternative communication media, because the new media (in its current incarnation, at least) isn't independent of the conventional media; it piggy-backs, or free-rides, on them. Whatever credit is due to the blogs for error correction shouldn't go to them alone, because their error-checking ability is derivative from the conventional media. (Goldman, 2008, p. 114)

Coady (2011) argues that both the conventional media and the new media are piggybacking on each other and the conventional media is not superior to the new media.

It is true that the new media is not entirely independent of the conventional media; in this sense there is no such thing as a pure blogosphere. But it is also true that the contemporary conventional media is not entirely independent of the new media; there is no longer any such thing as a pure conventional media either. In what follows I hope to make it clear that the new media no more freerides or piggybacks on the conventional media than the conventional media freerides or piggybacks on the new media. There is ample evidence that the

conventional media is heavily (and increasingly) dependent on the blogosphere. There are numerous well-documented cases of the conventional media picking up important stories from the blogosphere, and even of the conventional media plagiarizing the blogosphere. (Coady, 2011, p. 287)

The question here is, can the new media exist independently without the conventional media? Prior to the internet, the conventional media proved that it is independent and does not need to piggyback from the new media because the new media did not exist and I believe this is what Goldman is implying. The use of the conventional media is declining due to new internet applications such as the new media, but what if this decline continues and eliminates the conventional media? Can the new media provide reliable news on its own? Maybe they will find a way or they will create more rigorous policies. Fortunately, the conventional media found its way to the internet. It is apparent that Coady's argument is not only conditioned by reading the new media in it is entirety but with the condition of the co-existence of the conventional media. It is true that the contemporary conventional media is incorporating some news from the new media in their reporting but the majority of the blogs are dependent on the conventional media because they report news secondhand, based on news that has already been reported. Professional journalists derive their information directly from the source, such as by attending press conferences or being overseas to report directly what is going on abroad. It is safe to say that most bloggers do not attend these or have direct access, for example, to the White House or to be on scene in the middle of a crisis in the Middle East. This is where journalists come in because they have the resources and the access to this direct information. We cannot know what will happen to the news if it is reported independently without the conventional media—how much

will we even really know about what is happening in the world if we are relying on independent bloggers to inform us? This would be a disaster for democracy or the new media would have to adjust somehow to provide reliable information through following policies similar to the journalism policies Coady is arguing against—evolving into the conventional media itself. Coady's argument that the new media can exist independently of the conventional media doesn't take into account the privileged access to information that journalism and reporters have, thus allowing them to inform the public. There may be some way for it to happen if the conventional media were to disappear but then it would require the new media to become journalism, becoming itself the very thing Coady argues it doesn't need.

Conclusion

The emergence of the internet and new media and communication technologies has raised concern about whether or not the new media improves (Coady, 2011) or threatens (Goldman, 2008) the accuracy of public opinion. To argue, as Coady does that the new media contributes to a more accurately informed public is to assume that readers are self-disciplined enough to expose themselves to blogs that may go against their pre-existing beliefs and also that the new media contains more accurate information collectively than does the conventional media. The problem as I have stated, is that the public must not only read but also *believe* what they read and this must include a fair and balanced range of information, including those that go against their ideological beliefs (they must also be able to decipher what is true from what is false). This is not the natural tendency of the average reader and Coady fails to admit this in his argument. In addition, it is clearly impossible that one will be able to consume the entire amount of information that exists in the new media (or the conventional media for that matter). Inevitably

there will be information lost no matter which system a reader follows but an increase in the new media and a decrease in the conventional media cannot lead to a more informed public. The new media depends greatly on the first hand information provided by the conventional media and readers need some kind of filtering in order to sort through the information available. If left to their own devices, readers will not be fully informed on all aspects of an issue and thus will not be accurately informed. Coady makes the same mistake throughout his argument of assuming that readers will take those measures necessary to ensure that they are reading diverse and true information and, even if they intended to, it would be next to impossible for them to consume the entire content of the new media.

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الأخبار والمحتوى عبر الإنترنت و الصراع ضد الأخبار الزائفة

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مستخلص. أثارت الشبكة العنكبوتية (الإنترنت) ووسائل الإعلام الجديدة قلقاً بشأن ما إذا كان المحتوى عبر الإنترنت سيحسن أو يقلل من دقة الرأي العام. حيث انتقد بعض العلماء المزايا المعرفية لوسائل الإعلام الجديد على أساس أنها تقلل من دقة الرأي العام وتؤدي إلى انتشار الأخبار الزائفة (الأكاذيب والشائعات) (جولدمان ، 2008) في حين يرى بعض العلماء الآخرين أن الوسائل الجديدة تحسن الرأي العام و معرفة الأفراد (Coady ، 2011). تناقش هذه الورقة مزايا الإعلام الجديد مقارنةً بالإعلام التقليدي و تؤكد على أن الإعلام الجديد يعتمد في بناء المحتوى على الإعلام التقليدي و أنه يمكن تتبع اغلب المعلومات في الوسائل الجديدة لمصدر في الوسائل التقليدية. لذلك، إذا نمت الوسائط الجديدة وتقلصت الوسائط التقليدية ،فالكثير من قيمة الإنترنت و الوسائل الجديدة ستتخفف مما قد يؤدي إلى زيادة الأخبار الزائفة التي ليس لها مصدر موثوق. وقد يؤدي ذلك في نهاية المطاف إلى جمهور أقل معرفة، وهو ما يمثل تهديدا لمصلحة الرأي العام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخبار المزيفة ، المحتوى عبر الإنترنت ، الرأي العام ، الوسائل التقليدية