

[Trust and verification in an age of misinformation 2.1](#)

Transcript Module 2.1

[Music]

Hello and welcome to week two of the MOOC. I hope you enjoyed the materials and other elements for the week one stuff, and I'm really excited because now we're sort of getting up to date and taking a look at how we can understand today's media environment.

I think it's always been essential for journalists to kind of understand the media world that they're operating in, but there's never been a more chaotic and difficult media environment than the one that journalists are operating in right now. This is true in almost all countries around the world, although there are differences from some regions to another. The other piece why I think this is so important is that so much of the media environment is now something that journalists need to factor in to how they're doing their reporting and then how they push out and promote their reporting. So it's kind of essential I think for everyone in journalism to really think about these things, regardless of what your beat or what your focus is.

So the first piece that we're going to go through right now is really kind of understanding the the underpinnings in the environment. And then the second lesson that we're going to look at is really a focus on misinformation in this medium environment.

So to talk about today's media environment, I want to tell you a really quick story about a story I did back in the fall of 2016. It was about a town in the country of Macedonia. A town called Valles, home to roughly about you know thirty, forty thousand people a small town there. And what was unique about it is that through some research we discovered that it was home to hundreds of websites that were published and being run in English that had associated Facebook pages. A good number of those websites were actually about American politics. So as the American election in 2016 was going on you had a lot of really young men, in some cases teenagers, in this town in Macedonia who had launched and were running political websites targeting the American audience. And what we found as we dug deeper and looked more and more at their content as you can see here is that a lot of them were completely false stories.

And so what we have here is a media environment where in the old days you needed to own a newspaper, trucks and things like that to reach people. Here we have young men, in some cases teenagers, in Eastern Europe who are targeting Americans with information about the United States election. And in many cases we found that their stuff was going really viral on Facebook. In fact, their copied versions of some articles published by people in the United States were reaching more people on Facebook.

I interviewed one of them, and his quote is here on this page. He said, “yes the info and the blogs is bad, false, and misleading, but the rationale is that if it gets the people to click on it, and engage, then use it. So all they really cared about was getting people to engage with them on Facebook, which caused them to click on it, which caused them to load their website, and they earned money from the advertising.

And that is a remarkably different information and media environment than the one that we talked about in the previous week, where you know just the ability to actually be able to publish was something that would make people potentially notice and trust you over time. But now, of course, anybody can publish. And through Facebook you can reach people really quickly and really easily. And so I think the Macedonians are a perfect little case study.

Um, but if we break it down. Let's look at some of the core elements that have really changed. The first thing here is distribution has changed in a huge way. So up on the top here we have an example of a truck delivering newspapers. We have satellite dishes for a TV broadcaster. And as we talked about in week one, you need to have a lot of money. You need to have a big organization to gather news and information to package it together in a TV broadcast or in a newspaper to then get it out to people through satellite dishes or through trucks that get it to delivery points.

That was all a really integrated model where the gathering and distribution of the information of the news was all united in one place. And you owned the distribution as part of doing your reporting. Well today we see all these social networks and they're the ones who are really the place that stuff is getting distributed to more and more. You know you can write something and if it gets on Facebook and people share it it's out there and it's reaching more people through search engines through social networks. So the distribution has now been taken away from the hands of media companies in some ways. You know they still have an audience but that audience is all over these social platforms and that is a huge huge change. Let's see what that kind of looks like in practice.

So this is from a study done by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia where they looked over seven days to see what CNN published and where it went. And so you can see that this one publisher over seven days published on eleven different social platforms your Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and they pushed out almost 3,000 pieces of content. Now some of these might have been traditional articles or video reports. Some of them were unique to the platform, like stories created on Snapchat and stories created on Instagram. You can see now in this media environment before CNN was basically producing everything for their channel, which was available to people through their cable subscriptions. Now CNN still does that but it has to do all of these other things as well. And that's a very different media environment. These are very different requirements for journalists. It's a massive thing.

Then there's also the question in distribution of what do people actually see. So CNN put all of that content out there but who decides who saw it. I mean CNN is obviously a known brand and that's important. That helps them get lots of fans on Facebook for example. But even when CNN puts its content on Facebook that doesn't mean that every single person who liked the CNN Facebook page sees it because what happens is there's another intermediary there. So not only is CNN putting it on Facebook, somebody else's distribution platform. Once it's there, Facebook itself is using what they're called algorithms to decide which content to show to which people. And I without going really in technical detail on algorithms, basically think of them as a set of instructions. So Facebook, for example, in the newsfeed when you go in and see all the stuff from your friends and the pages you've liked. Facebook has an algorithm that that values certain things and customizes that feed for you. So if something is shared by somebody you interact with a lot on Facebook chances are you're gonna see that in your newsfeed versus a friend you haven't interacted with in any way for a long time. If Facebook knows that you've liked a lot of pages and interact with a lot of content in a certain topic area, it's probably gonna be more likely to show you things in that topic area. And so this is a computer with instructions of how to weigh and measure things in order to decide what to show people.

And so we see three examples here on the page. We see the Facebook trending box, which decides which stories are trending, and being talked about the most. But also your newsfeed is then perhaps the most important place where an algorithm is deciding what what people are seeing. We see next to that the trending list on Twitter where you know based on the amount that people are talking about something and sharing something and other factors. Twitter will declare which trends in which topics are trending. And below that is Google News, which you know also chooses which news organizations to include in that but once they're in there it chooses to decide which which stories to surface more and which ones not to. And so we have this world where distribution has been completely disrupted. And then algorithms are deciding increasingly what people are seeing or not seeing. And so people like the Macedonians know this and they try to create content that is going to appeal to people and get them to react, which causes the algorithms to say hey a lot of people are interacting with this content maybe I should show it to more people. So the system can really be gamed and manipulated now more than ever before.

The other thing that I want to last look at before we summarize these key points is just Facebook itself. It is an unheard-of entity in our world in terms of how big it is. How much influence it can have and, of course, how it is democratized how just about almost anyone can create a Facebook account, can share information there, can create a page. So here's something from New York magazine, which I think helps reinforce the size and importance of Facebook. Population-wise it's larger than any single country in the world. In fact it's bigger than any continent besides Asia at two billion members and now it's up to more than two billion. Monthly active Facebook users is the single largest non biologically sorted group of people on the planet after Christians. That's how many people are on Facebook. It's growing consistently at around 17 percent a year. Still impressive growth of Facebook, um and outside China where Facebook has been banned since 2009. One in every five minutes on the Internet

is spent on Facebook. And this last point is really key because we have a global audience for this course and I know I talk a lot about things from Europe and from the United States but in countries with only recently high rates of Internet connectivity. So places where the internet is still relatively new, like Myanmar and Kenya. Facebook is for all intensive purposes the whole internet. It's TRUE. In a lot of cases, people who are getting online are only, you know, are only creating Facebook accounts. Or in some cases there are programs that Facebook has sponsored where you can get online for free, but Facebook is one of only a handful of applications you can use.

So in this world we have shifted from the power brokers of media being the big media companies with big distribution and big news gathering operations. The power now rests in something like Facebook where there's more than 2 billion people on it and they're talking about personal things, but they're also sharing and consuming news. And that is a vastly different media environment that we as journalists must understand and contend with.

So let's summarize what we talked about here a little bit. So the shift in distribution from media companies to platforms and networks is a massive disruption. It has hugely changed the business but has also hugely changed how people are getting information. Our current media environment is democratized so it's very easy for anyone to publish something. To get an audience to generate attention now. Um that's a good thing. More people being able to publish is better than having the machinery and the distribution of information being in the hands of a few. But it means that we're kind of blessed and also cursed with a world characterized by information abundance. We have so much stuff being published all the time. You know we're all feeling a little bit overloaded. And this is global, this is all around the world because the internet is the thing that is connecting so many people. What this means is that the ability to capture attention and then monetize it to earn money from it you know with advertising or what-have-you. It's never been more competitive, so there's more actors out there, but it also has made it easier to manipulate people. You know those those stories from Macedonia when we looked at the ones that performed best on Facebook they were often completely FALSE. And so they knew that the more extreme they were, the more they appeal to people's biases, the more they kind of manipulated folks. They would get more reaction on Facebook, which would tell those algorithms, hey this content is really getting good traction let's show it to more people.

So we're in this environment with radically different distribution, huge amounts of information the ability to manipulate it so much of it being decided you know pro or con by algorithms of what people are or aren't seeing and that's very complicated. It's very different and it's also still relatively new for so many people. But I really believe every journalist needs to think about this stuff and understand it. It's really important. And so the last point is that journalists we have to navigate all this to do our jobs, first of all. I mean Facebook is an amazing place for news gathering. But we also have to factor it into how we do our reporting. We have to think about you know how have we used all of these networks and this a huge amount of information to do the best reporting and verification job we can. Are we on a consistent basis on whatever beat

were on. Really looking and scanning these networks to see what is out there and being on top of it. And I think also looking at how they work and the effect on people. And the kind of information that is spreading. These things are all really important pieces for how journalist do their jobs today. And in the second part of this lesson for this week we're going to dive in and focus on misinformation because of course that's a big focus for this course so I'm looking forward to getting into that with you.