

[Trust and verification in an age of misinformation 2.2](#)

Transcript Module 2.2

Hi, welcome to the second lesson in week two. We're talking about today's media environment and for this lesson we're really focused on one kind of by-product, one result of today's media environment, which is online misinformation. I'm gonna take you through what I consider to be a bunch of TRUE statements about online misinformation that will hopefully help you understand some of the factors driving it and the way it presents itself and that's going to lead us up into a week three where we're gonna learn how to track and debunk and verify this kind of stuff.

Alright so the first truth about online misinformation is that it comes in many forms with many motivations and these are important factors to consider. Sometimes people create something and the intent is not to deceive but it ends up being misinterpreted and it gets out there and it becomes a piece of misinformation. So the intent and the motivation is important as well as the types of you know the concrete examples of what it looks like. We need to think about both of these things as we're diving into it.

Now this is a chart that I shared with you guys as one of your reading materials. I hope that you read it and kind of internalize this. It's a great effort by Claire Wartell of First Draft to try and classify different types of myths and just information. But the overall takeaway that I want you to have is that you know it's a complex thing with a lot of different players with different motivations and the results and the way it manifests itself is different as well. If we just take two examples from this. Looking for on one side we have satire or parody. So this is a case where someone has created something with the intent you know of creating and making a joke of maybe engaging in some social commentary. Their intent is not to deceive people. But once it gets out there and is shared and people encounter it in different ways well it can be misinterpreted. And so you have something that turns into misinformation but wasn't intended to be. At the other end you have fabricated content. This is stuff that is a hundred percent FALSE. Created by people with the intent to deceive or do harm or maybe make money. And that is, you know, a different kind of thing. Even though in the end the two of them might be treated the same by different people. So that's an important distinction and I hope that you internalize this and remember to think about these things with the motivations of why something has been created of how it is being spread of how people are interacting with it. This actually helps you kind of track back to where it might have come from. So keep that in mind as we're digging into it.

Second truth about online misinformation is it's global. We talked about this a little bit in Lesson one you know. I gave the example of the Macedonian guys in Macedonia targeting an American audience about American politics. I mean who could really have imagined that ten years ago. It's a pretty wild outcome. Well at BuzzFeed we've been trying to track global misinformation. We've done stories. These are just some of the ones that we've either done or translated in

English. But you know our teams in Japan and other places have been working on all these kinds of things. So you know we looked at conspiracy theories about the German leader Angela Merkel. We looked at, you know, a man in Japan who decided to create sites publishing completely fabricated content like those Macedonian teenagers to try and make money. We talked about in Italy how, you know, popular parties and far-right parties have often been spreading misinformation and propaganda. And when I talked about the media environment in Lesson one I mentioned the Myanmar place relatively new to the Internet. Well our correspondent went there and found that you know Facebook is a place where a lot of misinformation where a lot of hate is being used to be spread there. And so as the country has gone online all of a sudden, don't mind that the background just fell down, but as the country has gotten online the country instantly basically has misinformation spreading on Facebook and in other places. So you know it is a global phenomenon and from one country to the next there are things that are unique and different but there are also some things that are absolutely the same and this is something we've learned from our reporting.

Ok next truth it feeds off of polarization and human bias. Polarization meaning you know people who are very have very different views of an issue. Particularly when it comes to politics, you know, to talk to those talk about those Macedonians again, you know, they published a lot of stuff that was very Pro Trump and anti Hillary Clinton and they were playing on the hatred of Clinton or they're a plant preying on the support of Trump as a way to really drive wedges between people and that's very common. Human bias is also another factor. Let me give you an example of, you know, how easy it is to kind of exploit these things. These are two teenagers I wrote about a long time ago. They're based in Canada. They were creating fake stories about Justin Trudeau the Prime Minister of Canada and I asked them you know what makes a great fake story and they said just tell people what they want to hear. So reinforcing people's bias, reinforcing polarization and deeply held views is something that a lot of creators of misinformation do. Whether they're financially motivated like these guys or ideologically motivated. And, you know, an example of a couple of the background things on this. Is that, you know, we have a key human behavior, which is that we quickly develop an irrational loyalty to our beliefs and we work hard to find evidence that supports those opinions and to discredit, discount or avoid information that does not. So we are more likely to believe and also to share information that confirms what we believe. So that's a bias we have.

The second human behavior is also particularly our tendency to create and spread rumors. In a time of uncertainty or you know after a natural disaster or where we lack certain amounts of information about an issue or a topic or an event we often try to fill in the gaps. And so that helps us to create alternative ideas, explanations for things. And then, because we are social beings, we tend to spread them. So our biases can get in a way of things but also a lack of information can cause us to try to fill it in with rumors. Those are two key human behaviors that people spreading misinformation will often try and attack and appeal to.

Next truth it exploits networks and algorithmic filtering. We talked about algorithmic filtering and networks in Lesson one. Just to give you a quick example of this. We did an analysis of of what

people kind of call hyper partisan political websites in the US. So you know very very much I'm a liberal, conservatives are wrong. I'm a conservative, liberals are wrong. And we analyze these sites and what we found, what this chart shows basically is that if when content was rated as mostly FALSE. So we fact check it. When it was rated as mostly FALSE that red line there. We saw that the amount of shares that that content got was actually higher than content that was rated mostly TRUE which is the green on average. So appealing to that bias and appealing to those extremes and telling people things that weren't TRUE often got more engagement because the algorithms saw people engaging with it and then it showed it to more people. So it naturally helped it spread. So you have people who are creating misinformation that is engineered to get a reaction because when you get a reaction that translates to the algorithm saying oh this is content more people want to see. So that's a really important piece to remember. I thought this quote really sums that piece up pretty well "whoever has the most people and activates them the most effectively determines what truth is." So in this networked world you have people who are really you know taking a piece of misinformation and working together to spread it as much as possible and that can really confuse people and can create these alternate realities.

Ok the last couple of truths here it's a profitable international business. Our Macedonians are a good example of this. Keep coming back to them. But there are people all over the world who are spreading and profiting from misinformation because they put ads on their website and they get people to click through the website after they share it on Twitter or they share it on Facebook. Let me give you an example of what this looks like. So here's a completely fake article that was shared on Facebook by a page that was supporting Donald Trump. And so this is a fake quote, made-up and attributed to an American film actor and director Clint Eastwood. And so it's completely fake, meant to appeal to people who support Trump. Meant to appeal to people who think liberals are idiots. And if you clicked through this on Facebook you know it looks like any other article on Facebook which is a big piece of this media environment. Everything kind of looks the same on social networks. This is the site you got. Now the reason I'm pointing this out is try to figure out where the article is here. Alright there it is. So all it is is that fake headline. Completely made-up and then a 'yes' and the 'no' to try and make it seem like there is a poll there for people to vote on. And everything else on the page there all around it is an ad. So this is how people are making money. There just in some cases they realize oh I just need a headline that people will click on from Facebook then I'll get the audience to my site and I can earn money from ads there. So this is what we're dealing with. It is a way to make money and because of that we're seeing an increase in people creating and spreading misinformation.

Last truth that's very important for all the journalists who are taking this course. Creators of misinformation often target the media. Let me give you an example. Here's a story by a colleague of mine about a guy in the United States who is running big networks of bots so automated accounts on Twitter that would push out pro-Trump information and often pro-Trump misinformation. And so this guy was actively often, you know, taking material that was misleading or FALSE and using huge amounts of accounts to push it out there and make it

seem like this stuff was really popular. Like a lot of people were encountering it and hoping that those bots would help push it into the view of real people on Twitter. And here's a quote from him "most of this is just contrived to force outrage and trigger new mainstream media journalists to cover 'shit,' sorry for the bad word, because they by the mean. They should have already figured this out and stopped covering us." So he's really targeting journalists. He's creating and spreading outrageous stuff. FALSE stuff to try and get journalists to react to it and to cover it. And in his view, any kind of coverage of it, is a win for him. Anytime he can take you as a journalist and make you give attention to him even if you're calling him a liar that's a win for him because his message gets out and we're gonna talk more about this in week 3 because this is a challenge if you're trying to debunk misinformation. **If** people are targeting you as a journalist and and you're still they still feel they get their message out by you debunking it how do you deal with that. So that's an important piece.

Alright let's quickly summarize some of the stuff we went through here. The first thing is that in week one, in our early lesson, we saw that a democratized media world really changes things but it also means more misinformation because anybody can publish. Anybody can get it out there. That's just one of the things that happens in this new more open media environment. Um, the other thing, that's happening in part because of algorithms is that this environment is rewarding the most extreme or attention capturing messages. When you have a huge amount of information out there you, the way to stand out, is to do something more extreme to get more and more attention for it. If you're just saying stuff that other people are saying that's hard to stand out. But if you're making crazy wild claims and if those claims appeal to people's biases well that's gonna get you some attention and that's gonna make the algorithms notice that attention as well. Third point is that there is absolutely a business model for online misinformation. We're seeing this and it's an international business model. The last thing, to reinforce that last point in our first lesson, is that journalists need to understand the forces behind the creation and propagation of this type of misinformation we need to understand the different types of it we need to understand the motivations. We need to understand players like that guy microchip who are trying to target journalists with it. And the last piece is that we then must figure out how to engage expose them in ways that serve the public. And that's what we're going to talk about in week three.