Trust and verification in an age of misinformation_Claire Wardle Interview

Transcript Module 2.3

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Craig Silverman: Hello everyone welcome to week two of the course, I'm really excited for this particular guest speaker we have Claire Wardle joining us. Hello Claire.

Claire Wardle: Hello Craig

Craig Silverman. And say hello to journalists around the world as well in this MOOC.

Claire Wardle: Hello journalist around the world.

Craig Silverman: Yeah, so so I mean Claire's bio is available in your materials, but just as a quick summary Claire is running an organization called First Draft, which is a non-profit. It's based out of the Shorenstein Center at Harvard and I'll let her tell you a little bit more about it. But it definitely started initially as an organization focused on helping address the challenges of verification, the challenges of misinformation in this media environment. And Claire is also a PHD, so she is also has a grounding in research and she did a lot of practical verification training for newsrooms as well when she worked at Storyful. Is that is that pretty good Claire? What do you think?

Claire Wardle: Yeah that's not bad. That's clearly been fact checked and verified.

Craig Silverman: Okay.

Claire Wardle: I would tell you if that was untrue.

Craig Silverman: Okay. Now do you want to just give a little one or two minutes just so people understand First Draft and and what it is and what you folks are working on now.

Claire Wardle: So yeah we were founded almost three years ago now full transparency it was actually a coalition of nine organizations. Craig's work was part of it. There was a number of different organizations and we really were specialists in verification. And I just want to make that distinction between fact-checking, which is the authentication of official sources. So often what politicians say or statistics or official reports. Verification which was the work of those of us who started First Draft was how do you authenticate material from unofficial sources? So how do you verify a Twitter post? How do you verify a video that's uploaded by Syrian activist on YouTube? So it was those kind of skills and it's that's a relatively new skill set in journalism. So we got

together to build a website to help train other journalists who were trying to develop these same skills.

Craig Silverman: Wonderful and so today you have news organizations around the world that are a part of this as well.

Claire Wardle: Yep, so we have a global partner network where we have the social platforms themselves but we also have a number of different newsrooms from around the world and we have universities and research institutes. We also do we have fact checkers. We have human rights organizations. So anybody who's in this space and wants to share best practice and tips and training resources.

Craig Silverman: Alright so you know Claire one of the reasons that I wanted to have you come in for this week is what we've been talking about and the readings that I've given them and some of my presentations for the students it's all been about you know two main things. So one what is today's media environment like? What are the big characteristics of it that journalists really need to understand so things like you know much more democratized, algorithms playing role. And then the second piece is really starting to think about okay so if we understand all of these things, what does that do for how journalists would traditionally build trust, would traditionally perform verification, and how do those things change? So why don't we start on the first piece here. Now I have recommended readings in this course. I have to confess I did not give them the research paper that you and Hossein did because it's quite long, so it's..

Claire Wardle: Only my mom read it.

Craig Silverman: I actually read it so I'm the person who read it which will enable help our discussion here. And you know without having to summarize it because it's I mean it's there's a huge amount of material in there. You guys talk about something that you have labeled information disorder. Could you tell us what information disorder is?

Clair Wardle: Yes, so around this time last year ,I was getting increasingly frustrated that everybody was using the term f * * * news.

Craig Silverman: Oh, fake news. Fake news

Claire Wardle: Oh, we're not allowed to say that word Craig. And it was partly because like Craig, I'd worked in this space for a number of years and I understood that this ecosystem was actually very complex. And that there were whole host of different types of problems. I love it was a visual and by saying news. People were thinking about texts. There wasn't fabricated websites and, of course, Craig you'd use this term for a number of years. And I'd use that term. And it was because we had a joint definition, which was fabricated websites that looked like professional news sites, created for-profit. And we used those terms. It made sense. Then there was this explosion of different types of information that people recognized as problematic and

everybody was labeling it using that phrase. And I just was frustrated that it didn't capture everything.

And secondly it was become incredibly useless because it was being used by different people in different ways. So people couldn't have a straight conversation because you know you talk to some people and they'll say well what you're talking about Claier is mistakes by the mainstream media. That's what you mean when you say that term. No right now I'm talking about fabricated news websites. And so then when the audience changed their meaning. And it started getting used by politicians around the world. And was weaponized and was used against me. I said ok this is no longer helpful. So information disorder is a way of describing the whole ecosystem that is advertisement on Facebook that's potentially you micro targeted to you. Do we mean a visual or a meme? Do we mean a bot Network? Do we mean genuine information that's actually spread to court on? Say something like revenge porn that's genuine information but you're trying to cause harm. If you're leaking somebody's emails we might cause that to cause harm. If you make a mistake and you're my mum and you share an image of a shark during a hurricane. She's not trying to cause trouble, so that's misinformation. But if you know something's harmful and you know it's false and you share it that's disinformation.

So this is a really complex ecosystem and so information disorder is the term I use to explain the whole sha-bang.

Craig Silverman: Now when you when you think about how we how we got to this point. And you think about some of the key things that have changed in that this this wild information environment. What are some of the drivers behind that?

Claire Wardle: So I mean the two main drivers are it's easier and cheaper than ever before to create hoax content. So you can be an eight-year-old boy in your bedroom and you can make a pretty sophisticated manipulated video on iMovie. It'll cost you almost nothing and you can secondly spread it more quickly than ever before. You don't need a form of production. You can press tweet or you can add it to a Reddit forum and if it gets picked up traffic it can be on the other side of the world in 30 seconds. So that, the ease with which you can create hoax content and the speed at which it can spread is what's really changed. And the fact that as humans we now receive more information on our phones every hour than we could ever dreamed of. And so in that environment our brains struggle to make sense of all this information. So we're also less likely to do the checks that we should do and more likely to share because we want to next with others. So there's a whole host of aspects to this, but it's the technology that's really changed it.

We've always lied to each other. We've always had hoax content. But we've never had these mechanisms that created it more quickly and spread it more quickly.

Craig Silverman: Um you know one of the there's a lot of double-edged swords is one of the things that I think about a lot in this in this environment. Like and overall I'm probably more of an optimist still. Even though I basically spend every day looking at the horrible stuff. Like where do

you come down on this? I mean are you still are you still optimistic about this information environment? That good stuff can win out. That it's still possible for more people to participate. Or are you really over the edge at this point saying god we really need to rein this in.

Claire Wardle: No I'm like you. I mean I think the ability for people to create and disseminate to ask questions of journalists. To say no I don't think that's true. The fact that we've democratized the system I think is amazing. We do need to make shifts because we've gone from a period where we had gatekeepers who helped us make sense of things. But that was problematic because those gatekeepers tended to be old white men. That was a problem. But at the other end of the spectrum is we now have this Wild West.

So the question is how do we in the time that you know it's not going to be overnight, but how do we shift the system, so we can have you know better better ways to help our brains make sense of information? How can we be more discerning and skeptical of the information we receive? How can we be more responsible individually about the information that we share? Because we're part of the problem if we share false information. So I think this is the transition been so quick. Iphones came around in 2007. So there's a lot of you know hand wringing and hair pulling. But in the whole grand scheme of history, this is like a blink of an eyelid. And so we as humans are just trying to get through this. And these social platforms, nobody saw this coming. And so we're seeing, which makes this fascinating. This period of transition where we're trying to work our way through as as humans with you know how to interact with technology. That's very new.

Craig Silverman: Yeah I mean it's if you think about it so we had we had the change with there was the internet but really it was the World Wide Web that started the real democratization process. And then all of a sudden we have phones. Then all of a sudden we have social networks and anyone can create and anyone can spread it. And this all happens within the span of as you say a very compressed amount of time. One of the things that I tend to think about a lot is just like the cognitive load. The ability of us to actually process the amount of information. And also the fact that it's so different to like open up something like Facebook news feed and look at it and see sure a picture from a friend of mine of what they did last weekend but also a news story from a page from an outlet I've heard. A friend of mine sharing a link to a website I've never heard of. And humans just aren't used to getting information that way, are they?

Claire Wardle: No, because I mean the thing about the nightly news is that you'd sit down and they're like bump-a-bump bump bump. We have music. We have cues that said Claire you're now going to watch the news for half an hour go into your news consumption habits. But we don't have that as you say. You're standing waiting in line for the bus and you're scrolling with your thumb and you're you know being bombarded with all these different types of information and all of those different pieces of information look identical. We don't even have ways of flagging you know the New York Times looks identical to a conspiracy theory blog site. Like they look the same.

So until we come up with a new kind of visual set of cues we're struggling. Maybe actually as you scroll through we could have bong bong-bong-bong when it's news. And then toot a toot toot might determine it's cats.

Craig Silverman: We just need audio cues. You just sold it. Everyone. Claire solved it. So we touched a little bit on like the consumption piece, but there's a part in your paper where you guys draw on the work of a scholar named James Carey, which I think gets to some of the that that production aspect. As well as a little bit of the consumption, but people have talked for a while about how social media is often kind of a performative thing. Wher you know we're liking stuff because we want to give a certain impression. We're sharing stuff because we want us to give a certain impression of us. So he talked about something called the ritualistic function of communication. Can you sort of describe that a little bit for us.

Claire Wardle: Yeah, so often when we talk about this subject we have this kind of very scientific idea of kind of transmission messaging, which is a piece of information gets produced and it gets sent to another person. Then you very sensibly you know make sense of that information.

The truth is actually that's not really the relationship we have with information. We have very emotional relationships with information. So James Carrey talked about reading a newspaper was a ritual. You did it every day you know. If you opened it on the train, people saw what newspaper you were reading. And he would argue that there was a ritual to them and part of what you were doing was performing that aspect. And I think that's the same on social media, but we forget that. So we have very highbrow conversations which is if only we had more fact checkers. If only we had more news from Syria we'd be better. The truth is people love to read newspapers for the cartoons and the sports coverage and the gossip section and the you know all that stuff. And so the same with social media is that we have emotional responses. We look we seek out information that reaffirms our worldview. We want to feel smug. We want to feel like, yeah I'm clever. This is right.

And my worry when we talk about this space is we tend to think about it in a very traditional this idea that we have a relationship with information that's rational. And it's not. It's emotional and that's problematic for journalists because journalists like well if only we just told the truth more we'd be fine. And I just think we need to think a little bit more differently about people's relationship to information.

Claire Wardle: So so following that line. I mean if we take that and some of the other stuff as sort of fundamentals for this environment. What are some of the tips and pieces of advice that you find yourself giving to journalists who are trying to navigate this world and also trying to help be people's kind of trusted guide to give them good information?

Craig Silverman: So the challenge for journalists now is that they're under incredible time pressure. And actually many newsrooms now have had you know staff layoffs, there smaller than ever before. And it used to be a time where you you know had the whole day to work on a

story and then you would write it and then it would be published overnight in a newspaper. Now journalists are asked to write a number of stories very quickly. And because of that they were also surrounded by more information than ever before. So it's not just let me just call up my mate Bob who's my source, he'll tell me because he has dinner with the police chief. It's let me search on TweetDeck for all the people that might be you know in an area or knowledge about about subject. And then very quickly because you under tight deadlines you have to write stories that are increasingly based on the kind of content that you can find on social media. Which as discussed previously, is a treasure trove. It's extraordinary what you can get access to and it has made journalism better, but what it's also meant is that journalist are very vulnerable to acting too quickly. Not checking out sources appropriately. Not doing that source checking, let alone fact-checking. Not checking the source the person that they're interacting with on Twitter or Reddit or 4chan.

And so now not only do you have to be careful because there's content out there you have to check. You also have the added problem of disinformation agents. Deliberately trying to hoax journalists by planting Easter eggs, like planting false content waiting for journalists to find it. Or contacting journalists pretending to be a concerned citizen. Be like I've just found this, I just wonder if you can help me with that. So now journalists are actually kind of under attack by people who are deliberately trying to manipulate them. So it's so it's a really difficult time to be a journalist. So more resources than ever, but because of that significant challenges.

Craig Silverman: Yeah so there there must be. One of the things that that that we're gonna talk about is the way journalists used to deal with information that was false. Typically the way that they dealt with it was they ignored it. They would say oh this is false so I'm not gonna I'm not gonna give it any more oxygen. I'm not gonna put it in my newspaper I'm not going to put it in my newscast. So today what you're talking about is we have people who are planning campaigns of disinformation. Who are planting false information hoping journalists will come upon it. Who are of course also able to create their own Facebook pages. Create their own Twitter accounts and put this stuff out there. So how does that change things for journalists when the stuff is kind of already by default able to get distribution?

Claire Wardle: So that's that's the issue now is that you know ten years ago journalism conferences we'd say oh what's the difference between a journalist and a blogger? And you know unlike doctors or lawyers where you have to go and get accreditation and you have a badge. We don't have that in journalism. And actually, that's a wonderful thing. But now we're in a situation where it's really difficult to know who has training who doesn't. Who's actually you know double sourcing? Who has a set editorial standards? Who has a corrections policy?

So the challenge for journalist is how do they show that they have distinctive qualities that they're actually doing work that they can stand behind when again in from an audience perspective. How does that Facebook page differ because it all looks the same. So the challenge for journalists is that they are up against not just people who are deliberately trying to sell hoax material, but you know hyper-partisan sites like sites that understand on Facebook

how they can build an audience. You know some of these hyper-partisan sites have more engagement than Washington Post or New York Times. There are people who understand the effectiveness of these social platforms for building an audience. They understand that things that are more sensational or things that make you angry or make you cry are going to build an audience.

So the ecosystem looks incredibly difficult different and essentially difficult for journalists as well as audiences.

Craig Silverman: What do you think about the ways we we stand out in this environment? And the ways that that we can make people feel that we're worthy of trust. Are there some things that you think are good practices for journalists to engage in?

Clair Wardle: I mean of course the answer is well we need more transparency and journalists should be much better at explaining that you know what I worked on this for a number of hours on this piece. I spoke to 16 sources. I then had my editor double-check. I then had to go and do this. Then actually I screwed up and I had to issue a correction. Journalist are very bad at explaining the process.

And the truth is nobody really wants to see how the sausage is made. So I understand why we haven't done that, but by not doing it it means that for most people they don't understand the difference between you know a professional news outlet and some of these sites that they follow on Facebook. So we do need to be better about that.

But the other thing and this makes journalists feel a little bit uncomfortable is. In an environment where increasingly people find their news on social platforms how can journalists ensure that they are effectively connecting with audiences. When the algorithm is actually privileging content that looks a certain way. Is more engaging. Is more emotional. Is all the things that journalists tend not to be. Journalists tend to be well we're distant. We're objective. We're just telling the facts. It's very difficult in this environment for journalism to stand out.

So I'm not saying that journalism should become more emotional or should become something more sensational. But that's a challenge right now because ultimately whereas more people get their information on these platforms. These platforms are actually kind of privileging those sites that are doing those things that kind of go against mainstream media's practices.

Craig Silverman: Yeah there's there's an element of today's environment that's kind of like a pure attention market. It's just whatever you can put out there that captures people as you say through emotion or other things like you will be rewarded with that.

Claire Wardle: Yeah and I think sometimes I mean even we all human. I mean I know that there's you know more quality journalism I can consume. When I'm tired I just want to you know watch cute puppy videos. Of course I do.

And so I think that goes back to how do we recognize when people want information? How they want information? How can use organizations recognize that? In the morning I might want a different type of information than then later. I just don't think we've optimized for this new media environment because that what we used to do newspapers and TV. Now we just need to put it on the web or now we just need to put it on Facebook and we haven't I don't think many mainstream news organizations have thought about how how could they can work effectively on these new platforms.

Craig Silverman: So two last things I want to chat about before we go. So one is in the paper and I talked about the old way of doing silence for false information. You talk about in the paper something called strategic silence. I'm open you can explain that a little bit and when you think it's appropriate.

Clair Wardle: So going back to that problem that news organizations are being targeted. It's important to work out that disinformation agents see coverage from the mainstream media as the optimal endgame. So they might start a rumor on 8chan. And 8chan knowing that it's gonna jump to Reddit. Then it's gonna jump to a kind of some fringe sites. It might jump to Facebook and then Twitter. And then know that that's probably gonna get picked up by mainstream journalists. And they're going to report on it be like I've got a scoop look at me.

But by doing that they've actually given oxygen to a rumor. In journalism today that's kinda like this new tipping point. Which is as journalists if we cover a rumor too early we're actually giving oxygen to something that we shouldn't give oxygen to. If we leave it too late, it's gone too far and it's very difficult to bring that back by debunking or fact-checking etc etc. So I argue and this makes a lot of journalists feel kind of uncomfortable which is when we see some of this stuff we need to be very aware of why we're reporting on it. Because if we report on it and don't recognize that by doing so there might be some unintended consequences.

So if lots of journalists write constantly about BOTS and hacking and disinformation does that mean that we're actually saying to everybody all the systems broken? You can't trust the system which means more people turn away from the democratic system or don't vote. I mean I think we just need to be very careful. I'm not saying journalists shouldn't cover stories but I think we just need to be a little bit more careful about how we cover disinformation. And when we cover particular rumors can we guarantee that we haven't given that rumor additional oxygen.

And in one example that data and society talked about is you know for about thirty years that mainstream media decided not to cover the Ku Klux Klan because they were worried about giving oxygen to the Ku Klux Klan. And there's questions now about well what does that look like in this environment. Are we actually giving additional oxygen to specific rumors or communities in this country or globally that by doing so we're kind of doing their work for them.

It's not an easy concept. It's controversial. I just think in today's media environment as a news industry we should be talking about it. I just don't think we are. In the same way as we think

about suicide coverage. Jow what's the responsible way of covering disinformation and I just don't think we're there yet.

Craig Silverman: Yeah it seems like it's a conversation that hasn't happened a huge amount. I guess at the very least for the average journalist just to have that pause and say okay where is this rumor where where is this claim at? Has it advanced to a certain point? Are we potentially giving it the oxygen that it desires? Should we wait and even I guess just having that that discussion or thought process is one simple way to do it, huh?

Claire Wardle: Yeah just being aware of and especially thinking who's the person who started this rumor? Am I actually just a cog in their system like they want me to report it. And I think when a journalist thinks about it like that which is hang on I'm doing the work of a troll. Or you know or a bot then that people feel very different about that.

Craig Silverman: Yeah alright so last thing I wanted to talk about is so there's there's that the strategic silence to think about that. The other thing that I think you've done a good job of raising a lot is for people to really think about the impact of visual communication. In particular for journalists not just to focus on you know debunking a fake story or something like that. But to also think about the images that are being used and images that travel without any text whatsoever. So why are visual images so important? And then in this environment what should just be be thinking about in terms of how they're they're approaching and covering stuff that is spreading purely visually?

Claire Wardle: So part of the issue is our brains. It goes back to that again which is we are much more trusting of visuals than we are text. We can actually make sense or our brain thinks it can make sense of a visual much more quickly. So if I look at something now my brain goes oh yeah it's a tree. Whereas a text I have to have to read. It takes longer. So what that means is that visuals are actually much more successful as vehicles of disinformation. And people who are trying to sow disinformation know this and so use visuals much much more.

The other thing is on social networks, you can see a visual by just scrolling you don't have to click through it. So you just a glance at it. So things like you know whether it's a slightly manipulated photo or a video. We're much less likely to think is this real. We're much more likely to trust it. And things like memes. So memes actually work because they're normally making cultural references. They're kind of an in-joke. There's something like a nod or a wink to something culturally. So because of that again our brain actually has to use a little bit more brain juice to make sense of it because you're having to make that connection.

So what frustrates me about journalists and academics is they dismiss memes because they think they're childish or silly. But actually disinformation ages if you look at 4chan and Reddit, it's full of memes for good reason. Because they actually understand how powerful they are. So I often say to journalists you know you can't dismiss them and actually you need to understand them. That's why journalists should be spending more time in these communities because you

actually have to understand the culture of those communities to make sense of the nods and the winks the references and the in jokes. Those in jokes is what makes them so powerful. You know I think BuzzFeed you did a great job of talking about the Parkland School survivors. How they understand visual media and they've done a great job of working with memes and connecting with culture and making references that have made their messages much more powerful.

But for a journalist who's you know I don't want to name names. But a journalist over 35 is gonna struggle with that. Because that's...

Craig Silverman (interrupting): Excuse me. Excuse me - Wow I'm attacked in my own guest speaker conversation. Unbelievable!

Claire Wardle: You and I are a part of that category. But I think generally when I speak to a lot of journalists will be entirely dismissive of this genre and just you know dismiss it entirely and say with academics. They're doing all this research and it's all on text websites. Nobody's really studying this effectively enough. And that's really where these messages are being spread. And they're hugely effective. They travel very very quickly and like you say they're going onto the radar.

I mean again if we think about the platforms. A platform like Facebook it's real and Google is struggling computationally to make sense of visuals. Computers are much much more skilled right now at making sense of text. It can understand texts. Visuals, we're a million miles away from making sense of visuals. So again in terms of flagging, monitoring, taking down you know visuals are much more effective than text.

Craig Silverman: Wonderful, well look thank you so much Claire. I appreciate you coming to join us. I'm sure people found this interesting and helpful. And folks yes I'm sure they did.

Claire Wardle: Even people over thirty-five?

Craig Silverman: Even people over 35. Washed-up old people like me hopefully appreciated it yeah so we'll have another guest speaker next week and thanks again Claire.

Claire Wardle: Thanks very much break

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