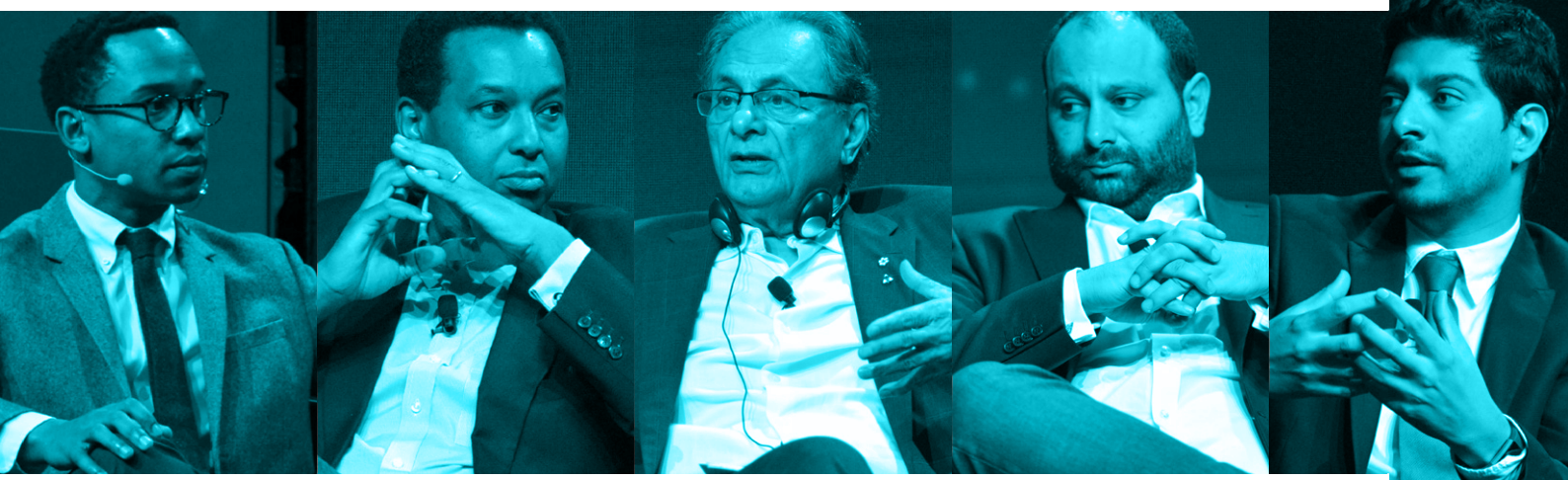


CONFERENCE REPORT

A Crisis of Connectivity: New Media and Trust-Formation



Moderator

Kamali Melbourne

TRT World Presenter

Speakers

Rageh Omaar

ITV News International Affairs Editor

Haroon Siddiqui

Editorial Page Editor Emeritus of the Toronto Star

David Patrikarakos

Writer and Journalist

Riyaad Minty

Acting Director of Digital for TRT World & TRT Arabic

© TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PUBLISHER
TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
DECEMBER 2018

PREPARED BY
YASMINA ALLOUCHE

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL
AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347
ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ
İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON
PORTLAND HOUSE
4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4
LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.
1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036
WASHINGTON DC / USA

www.trtworld.com

CONFERENCE REPORT

A Crisis of Connectivity: New Media and Trust-Formation

This is a report on a public session titled “**Crisis in Connectivity: New Media and Trust-formation**” held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.



- 1** *How do traditional media outlets adapt to the new media environment?*
- 2** *How are social media platforms utilised to ensure trust towards traditional media outlets?*
- 3** *Can virtual platforms be neutral?*
- 4** *How does corporate market power in online platforms contribute to the crisis of fake news?*
- 5** *Can fake news be the element preventing a meaningful engagement in online debates?*

Summary

The “A Crisis of Connectivity: New Media and Trust Formation” session dealt with one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century: the new era in information consumption provided by social media platforms, and the speed and magnitude of their influence on users worldwide. Leading journalists and experts in the industry provided their views on the decline of traditional media, as well as the challenges of living in what some have termed a “post-truth” era. Together, panelists unpacked the complexities of relying on social media for information, and the difficulties raised by the lack of effective regulatory mechanisms to limit hate speech and propaganda.

The panelists provided an engaging discussion and offered some solutions on the way forward in educating the masses to adopt a more critical approach towards social media in the future, whilst establishing necessary regulations to curtail the phenomenon of “fake news.”

The subject of “trust” in light of “fake news” defined much of the discussion of the session. Even though social media streamlined major revolutions such as the Arab Spring, the Cedar Revolution and Green Revolution in Iran, panelist Haroon Siddique proposed that the contradictory element of the uncontrolled reach and the functioning of digital media has resulted in the creation of a “monster” in today’s era. This claim was refuted by Acting Head of Digital Strategy for TRT World and TRT Arabic, Riyaad Minty, who argued that the idea of trust remains rooted between people and that mainstream media fails to accommodate the power of connectivity that digital platforms have put forth.

As the discussion continued, journalist Rageh Omaar underlined how digital media has allowed greater and easier access to stories in conflict-ridden areas through the medium of local citizens. David Patrikarakos argued that elements of new media that vouch for freedom of expression also come with contradictions, particularly when the state uses it against the oppressed.

Another paradox regarding digital media that was highlighted was the concept of allowing the creation of silos as digital space permits, where each community is able to converse online with each other based on common perceptions and prejudices. This factor was then associated with rising populism in today’s world which has not only led to a weakening of the concept of democracy but also a transformation in its global meaning. In conclusive remarks, Rageh Omaar highlighted the lack of authenticity that comes with social media outlets: where news on Syria remains in the same feed as with what a celebrity like Kim Kardashian does. As a result, as much as new media has allowed the world to become closer in terms of sharing ideas, its drawbacks will shape the global discourse for years to come.



Kamali Melbourne moderated the panel on New Media and Trust Formation and asked the panelists about the future consequences of new media usage.

Introduction

With increased digital transformation comes increased complexity and ambiguity. Users of new media technologies are now able to actively monitor and be a part of international events, aggregate and filter news and add their viewpoints to any given story's narrative. As the world increasingly embraces digitisation, communication via digital platforms is increasingly raising questions regarding the nature of 'truth'.

Digital platforms such as Facebook and Google are becoming the new gatekeepers of information which flows through these platforms without being filtered by professional journalists. In the commercialised environment of new media, people have come to rely on like-minded networks, increasing confirmation bias and facilitating the creation of alternative 'truths'. This session's report will highlight the challenges associated with global digital connectivity and the way news is received, as well as the issue of trust in online platforms and how it can overcome these barriers in order to transform digital media to be more ethical and trustworthy.

The Power of Social Media

The power of new media has created a digital empire that has changed the way information is produced and received. This is defined by the unprecedented influence social media has had in the last decade, altering the relevance of traditional media sources and the role of journalists as primary news providers.

For the first time in history, people are more interconnected than ever - with a simple click of a button you can now connect with anyone, anywhere in the world. This revolutionary way of connecting has ultimately blurred the notion of who we define as 'strangers' and the type of information we are made privy to of those around us.

This type of mass connection and access has enabled grassroots organisations to progress further, impacting thousands in a much shorter time. The power of social media to spur on the Green Revolution in Iran or the Arab Spring has highlighted the depths of power in controlling narratives, challenging global systems and altering our realities.

However, this new-found power severely lacks accountability and regulation. Haroon Siddiqui, the Editorial Page Editor Emeritus of the Toronto Star, drew the audience's attention to how 30 years of unregulated functioning has made a social media platform like Facebook into a "monster".

Indeed, Facebook, one of social media's giants, has 2.2 billion monthly active users. Its messaging service, Messenger, has another 2 billion. WhatsApp, which it also owns, has another 1.2 billion users, and Instagram accounts for 700 million users. Combined, Facebook has a reach of 5.2 billion monthly active users - an astronomical reach that has been used by those with good as well as bad intentions.

Facebook provides many advantages through its outreach, for example, for businesses with international operations. However, it can just as easily be used for immoral purposes, such as facilitating the arms trade in Libya. But the lack of responsibility in regulating content on apparently neutral platforms means both extremes can exist.

Author and journalist David Patrikarakos, touched upon 'Cyber Utopianism' which is the notion that online communication is emancipatory with the internet favouring the oppressed over the oppressor. However, the very same tools emancipating the voiceless is at the same time being manipulated by those denying citizens a voice. New media is able to serve both.



Haroon Siddiqui discusses how social media giants often do not face responsibility of their content because they claim their platforms are neutral.

Propaganda in support of military operations is one thing, while propaganda for the purpose of winning people over is another. This was exemplified in the Ukraine issue where Russian President Vladimir Putin aimed not to militarily defeat Ukraine but to clear enough space within for the free-flow of propaganda in order to divide the population for his desired end.

Social media is also key in allowing the wider audience to have access to places which are inaccessible for journalists due to safety reasons. The siege in Aleppo or ethnic cleansing in Myanmar shot into the global conscience thanks primarily to user-generated footage through the civilian lens.

Citizen journalism is now one of the main sources of news from conflict-zones on digital media platforms which mainstream media channels are forced to rely on with no alternatives for their own. User-generated content is used to keep audiences informed, but media channels are able to remove responsibility by claiming they cannot independently verify the information they are broadcasting of which they are reliant on.

For this reason, traditional media outlets have shifted to digital platforms, recognising that their own platform no longer adequately represents what people expect to see with breaking stories or through mediums which are not visibly biased.

Easily acquired news content aids the type of fast news that mainstream media outlets crave but has also made post-literate platforms grow in popularity. Free-writing Facebook has been replaced by Twitter which limits users to two sentences of expression. But writing as an expression is being further confined by sites like Instagram and Snapchat which encourage users to communicate through pictures.

Platforms which limit users ultimately reward sensationalism. According to David Patrikarakos, the first social media president is Donald Trump for being memorable through the content he posts on Twitter.

For Minty, sensationalism on digital platforms is no different from those stoked by tabloids. But tabloids as a traditional news outlets are being eroded as a result of people choosing digital platforms to receive their news. In this regard, according to Minty, the concept of New Media is already outdated - it is simply just media at this point.

The main crux of social media is that in essence it is antisocial and the Newsfeeds of Facebook and Twitter are not necessarily consisting of news. According to Patrikarakos, social media platforms are simply "businesses that are designed to make money." What is their product? Us.

Media is then morphed into multiple entities which reflect what you wish to see. For Rageh Omaar, ITV News international affairs editor, social media for the next generation acts like a "sweet shop" of news where in one instance they can learn about deaths in Syria and in the next, what about celebrities like Kim Kardashian are getting upto.

The Era of Fake News

Where digital media outlets are arguably connecting audiences from afar, the crisis of the success of social media platforms is that traditional media outlets have lost their relevance and the reliance of local communities.

The mass production of information through digital media also enables misinformation to be amplified. Therefore, maintaining trust on digital platforms becomes even more difficult when much of it has already been lost. Minty mentions how, according to the Edelman's study, the Trust Barometer in the media is "at an all-time low".

In essence, Facebook is not a news organisation and its material cannot be fact-checked or verified, as is normal procedure in news outlets. Yet, it still operates as a news broadcaster for being one of the main news providers for users looking to consume information as quickly as possible.

This allows people to select the type of news they wish to receive and discard the rest which means journalists are not influencing the truth as they were once relied upon to do so. Now audiences are forming their own conclusions through information they actively gather as opposed to receiving it from one source and accepting the conclusions drawn for them by their providers.

Digital media platforms are continuing to grow with every technological advancement but understanding of it is failing to progress positively particularly when media organisations have the responsibility of to guide their audiences to facts and truth.

The gap between tabloids and digital media platforms is ever growing and citizens have lost their ability to figure out the truth. For Siddiqui, newspapers or televisions were previously be the primary source for information. That privilege is now depleting and is replaced by the plethora of misinformation buoyed by the depths of the internet's information capacity.

According to Minty, news broadcasters have a responsibility to not only provide content but also to inform their audience when they are unable to report on the unfolding facts of breaking news stories. Instead they should outline what they have been able to verify and take their audiences through the careful fact-checking procedures that are being adopted.



Riyaad Minty, Acting Director of Digital for TRT World and TRT Arabic, speaking about how digital platforms lack trust and how a lack of understanding of these platforms compounds this problem.

This filters out fake news and allows for a degree of transparency in news outlets that builds trust between the news giver and the information receiver. The depletion of trust within the mainstream has also contributed to a crisis in confidence in liberal democracies, a sharp increase in populism, and the rise of authoritarianism.

This is best exemplified by how white supremacists and nationalists use social media to garner support for their rhetoric by building a digital army of like-minded individuals who create enough furore to actualise their sentiments.

Prejudices and bigotry are amplified when users can engage easily on platforms with those they agree with and who can encourage the same rhetoric, therefore, increasing the scale of people that can be influenced or feel they have mass support.

Alongside the challenges of maintaining trust and truth in digital platforms, criticism levelled at new media and digital platforms centre around the invasion of privacy for users that are unwillingly volunteering information which is being stored and monetised.

What transpires is the information used by corporations to influence how people vote, or the type of advertisements consumers see from businesses based on their interests. The issue with social media is simply how its addictiveness drives people to continue using it despite knowing the risks faced when signing up to online sites.

The revelations of privacy infringement and the type of content produced on supposedly neutral platforms has pushed institutions like the European Union to fine platforms that fail to clamp down on content deemed immoral.

Anti-hate laws have also been passed, deeming digital platforms responsible for the content produced on their sites as well as the ramifications of this content on society. However, as Siddiqui highlights, outlets which claim their platforms are neutral do so primarily to absolve themselves of any blame and responsibility for the type of content produced on their sites.

Fact-checking costs time and money in traditional news organisations. Sites like Facebook cannot afford to allocate resources to do this and so neutrality becomes the buffer between culpability and freedom of expression.

News organisations are trained to carefully monitor content that they broadcast otherwise they risk being penalised by regulatory bodies like Ofcom. Aside from community guidelines, Facebook has no such regulatory body, which makes it more difficult to accept culpability for hate speech or the type of radicalisation that can occur on impressionable minds.

As new heights are reached, an ethical framework needs to be laid out for digital platforms which continue to operate and the limitations in place need to be more explicit so that companies that breach them are held to higher account.



David Patrikarakos explains how Ukraine was the first social media war of the 21st century and how social media is used by states to further their diplomatic goals.

Conclusion

New age media has revolutionised human interaction for better and for worse. Whilst we may have the means to be more connected than ever, people are at their most antisocial level today and interactions and relationships are being redefined.

At the reach of our fingertips, a deluge of information is now accessible and world's previously unknown are now within reach from the comfort of our homes. Conflicts are witnessed in greater detail and global events can now be followed without the guidance of news outlets.

Whilst progress is undeniable, the consequences of these advances mean that issues that were once confined to community spaces are now magnified and placed in the public spotlight for unwarranted ridicule. This climate has provided fertile ground for prejudices and bigotry of like-minded individuals to fester and to garner support for viewpoints that would not previously have a platform of this magnitude to be projected from. The same platform which advocates for violence to deadly end is also being used to actualise change in new ways that challenge status quos, revolutionise countries and empower citizens.

Society as we know it is being redefined and more people are influencing global stories than ever before. With that comes a responsibility of prioritising individuals over the collective which can be consequential and so a greater regulation of new mediums needs to be in place so that the moral framework is not altered until it becomes unrecognisable.

As we move forward, our understanding of new media needs to reflect the pace of change. This is so that the lines between truth and facts are not overridden by sensationalist misinformation that promotes 'fake news' as the foundation of our understanding of the world.

