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The Case Against Social Media:
Mass Misinformation in the Covid-19 Era

Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

Despite the rising salience of "fake news" in the U.S., propaganda, misinformation, and conspiracy theories are hardly new phenomena. In the 1950s, The historian Richard Hofstadter famously wrote in *The Paranoid Style of American Politics* about conspiratorial thinking in American history, including McCarthyism, ravings about water fluoridation, and wild tales about the Illuminati and Free Masons secretly dominating American politics and society.

Americans are now witnessing a new era of conspiracy mongering and fake news via the rise of the fringe "QAnon" movement, among a plethora of paranoid claims that Covid-19 is an elite-fueled hoax and that it was secretly created by powerful people working in the shadows. Pew Research Center polling from September finds that nearly half of Americans – 47 percent – have read or heard about the QAnon conspiracy, which claims that the Democratic Party and media are secretly coordinating a cannibalistic satanic pedophilia ring, and that only Donald Trump and one of his allies embedded in the "deep state" stand in their way.

The best conspiracy theories are those that are completely unencumbered by facts or evidence. This reality holds for QAnon as well. Trump's supposed ally in the depths of the "deep state" – Q – appears not to be government employee at all, and he does not even reside in the United States. Rather, Jim Watkins – who reportedly hosts the primary QAnon accounts on 8Chan, is a pig farmer living in Manila. And in a truly Orwellian twist, 8Chan itself reportedly serves as a venue for the dissemination of child pornography. Finally, President Trump, who is supposedly leading the effort to combat "deep state" pedophilia, has gone out of his way to identify with Ghislaine Maxwell, announcing that he "wish[ed] her well" after she was arrested and charged for participating in Jeffrey Epstein's child sex trafficking ring.

Outside of QAnon, American political discourse on Covid-19 has also been infected with various false and conspiratorial claims. This misinformation is primarily fueled, not by mainstream media coverage, but by questionable actors operating in social media venues like *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, among other sources. I sought to drill to the core of the fake news phenomenon, to better understand precisely how this new social media ecosystem has contributed to the dumbing down of the nation on important political matters of the day.

To identify the effects of social media in disseminating misinformation, I examined two recent national polls by the *Pew Research Center* – from April and June 2020 – covering American media consumption, and as related to opinions of fake news, conspiratorial thinking, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through an original statistical regression analysis, I isolate the power of social media consumption in predicting consumption of, and beliefs about various forms of fake news. "Controlling" for other demographic factors, including respondents' partisan identities, self-declared ideology, gender, age, education, race, and income, I am able to rule out other factors as potential influences on one's likelihood of consuming and embracing fake news.

The concern with the noxious effects of social media began to intensify in the spring of this year when various fake news stories and conspiracies were first popularized in these venues. And there is good reason to be alarmed. My analysis of Pew's April 2020 survey finds that consumption of social media – including *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and "online forums"/"discussion groups" – is significantly linked not only to being increasingly exposed to fake news, but with struggling to distinguish between which news stories and information are real, and

which are fabricated. Individuals who reported getting and posting their information and news on Covid-19 from these venues were more likely to say they had consumed fake news stories and conspiracies on Covid-19, including the claim that Vitamin C is an effective treatment against the virus, that 5G cell towers are secretly spreading Covid, and that "at-home treatments" are "effective" for combating "various serious cases of the Coronavirus."

The problems didn't stop with the fake news above. Social media users were also consistently more likely to fall victim to all types of fake news related to Covid-19. They were significantly more likely:

+ To admit that much of the "news and information" they had "seen or heard about the coronavirus" "seemed completely made up."

+ To agree that they "initially" believed that "made-up news and information" on Covid-19 "was true before realizing it was made-up."

+ To report that they had "stopped going to a specific source" of news or information because they "thought that they were putting out made-up stories and information about the coronavirus outbreak."

+ To report that they lacked confidence in their ability "to check the accuracy of news and information about the coronavirus."

+ To say that they found it "difficult to determine what is true and what is not" when it comes to "get[ting] news and information about the coronavirus outbreak."

Unsurprisingly, considering their greater exposure to fake news and their increased struggles in identifying it, social media users were also significantly more likely to agree that "made-up news and information leaves Americans confused about the basic facts of the coronavirus outbreak."

Recognizing the PR disaster of serving as a hotbed for Covid-19 fake news and conspiracy theories, *Facebook* and *Twitter* quickly announced that they were implementing efforts to crack down on false "news" and information on their platforms. Mark Zuckerberg announced in April that *Facebook* was committed to "help[ing] connect people with authoritative health information and experts and at the same time to limit the spread of misinformation" by directing "more than 2 billion people" to a "Covid information center" with "high-quality content" from health experts, while promising to "take down" false health information from *Facebook* users if it was perceived to "put people at risk," and by working "with independent fact checkers" to expose "more than 4,000 articles" posted by *Facebook* users who were "spreading misinformation" via the use of "warning labels." Similarly, Twitter announced in late-March that it would take down misinformation-based content concerning Covid-19 that downplayed the danger of the virus, that toted false cures, and falsely promised that mass contraction would help defeat the virus by promoting "herd immunity."

Despite promises to crack down on Covid-19 fake news, misinformation continued to be associated with social media use in the months following *Facebook*'s and *Twitter*'s spring

announcements. These venues cracked down on many of the most egregious conspiracies and misinformation, but available evidence also suggests that they continued to serve as delivery mechanisms for misinformation among a subset of users – Americans (and especially Republican Americans) who heavily rely on President Trump and social media for their information about Covid-19. My statistical examination of the *Pew Research Center*'s June 2020 national survey finds that social media consumption was still consistently linked with embracing Covid-19-related misinformation, after controlling for other factors, including respondents' partisanship, ideology, race, gender, education, age, and income. More specifically, my analysis examines individuals who reported: 1. Getting "political and election news or information directly from…Donald Trump or his presidential campaign" via "email, social media, or [his] campaign website"; and 2. Those who reported relying on social media, including *Twitter* and *Facebook*, as "the most common way you get political and election news."

These two groups are significantly different in their susceptibility to Covid-19 misinformation. Reflecting *Twitter*'s and *Facebook*'s crackdown on conspiratorial information and other fake news, primary reliance on these venues (question #1 above) was no longer associated with increased likelihood of embracing fake news conspiracies. But individuals (particularly Republicans) relying heavily on political and election news from Trump's campaign and social media (question #2 above) were significantly more likely to embrace false information and conspiratorial thinking, along multiple dimensions. They were more likely to believe the baseless claim that the official Covid-19 death count (more than 100,000 by June) had been intentionally exaggerated, to have heard that "powerful people" had secretly and "intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak," to agree that this conspiracy theory was true, and to have watched the "Plandemic" conspiracy "documentary" claiming that Covid-19 was created and unleashed by a secret cabal of elites. This sub-group of Americans likely includes many of Trump's tens of millions of *Twitter* followers, but also right-wing Americans who participate in all types of social media groups and closed right-wing echo chamber networks that are trafficking in Covid-19 related conspiracies.

Social media venues have also been at the vanguard of disseminating the QAnon conspiracy theory. As the *Pew Research Center* reports from its spring 2020 national survey, social media users – specifically those consuming *Reddit*, *Twitter*, and *Youtube*, were among the most likely to be exposed to QAnon conspiracy information, although exposure was much less on *Facebook* and *Instagram*. Traditional media consumers – those following the *New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, and *MSNBC* – were also regularly exposed to the QAnon conspiracy. But the big difference between legacy media and social media in this instance is that the coverage in traditional media has been overwhelmingly negative, almost universally referring to QAnon as a fringe conspiracy theory, while social media venues have become prime culprits in disseminating pro-QAnon paranoia.

The crackdown on social media against misinformation has seemingly succeeded in limiting the volume of blatantly fraudulent content that is consumed by their patrons. But major problems persist – particularly in right-wing informational networks – when it comes to promoting and consuming conspiracy theory paranoia and fake news. Social media boosters will no doubt point to the crackdowns as evidence that these venues can be reformed and regulated to avoid the worst forms of misinformation that thrive online. But the reality remains that social media like *Facebook* have long enabled the proliferation of insulated echo chambers, since they amplify content that users "like," click on, and comment on, by providing their consumers with more of that content, while allowing users to "block" or "unfriend" any individuals who challenge their preexisting views. This long-standing practice means that social media have become prime purveyors of propaganda, fake news, and conspiracy theories, even if their administrators do eventually censor the worst of this misinformation in the face of the negative PR that follows their tolerance of its dissemination. One "solution" to dealing with the travesty of social media-induced misinformation is for Americans to gravitate in mass away from these venues as mediums for political "education" and engagement. Online echo chambers reinforce extreme political views, while providing their consumers with a sense of false confidence in their beliefs – one that is completely divorced from evidence or rational thinking in the case of the QAnon and Covid-19 conspiracies and fake news. The sooner Americans move away from relying on these venues, and toward engaging with real reporting and fact-checking venues, the better.

A digital copy of Anthony DiMaggio's new book, Rebellion in America, can be read for free here.

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