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How Social Media and Denial Affects One's Ability to be Informed

For most people, social media is a huge part of life and how they get informed. Whether it's keeping track of what their peers are doing or being updated on current events by major news corporations, social media undoubtedly helps integrate people with the world around them. However, whether or not social media has been beneficial is a controversial topic among many. One such person with a strong opinion on how social media has affected the general population is Danah Boyd. In the article, "Whether the Digital Era Improves Society is Up to Its Users—That's Us," Boyd, a social media scholar and Harvard researcher, highlights the ever-continuous dispute over whether this era of technology has been good for society overall. Boyd asks one question regarding one of the main vessels for releasing information: "what role does social media play in generating or spreading societal fear?" She bases her arguments on three claims: that "we live in a culture of fear;" that "the attention economy provides fertile ground for the culture of fear;" and that "social media is magnifying the attention economy."

Boyd asserts these claims are important to recognize, because our societal beliefs help structure how we use technology, and those uses of technology spread fear. She argues that people fear things that are unpredictable and unknown, yet technology connects us to "people who are different from us, the very people we are likely to fear" (Boyd). Another element that has come with media and technology is a plethora of information. However, because there is so much information and everyone wants to be heard, people often turn to fear in order to get the attention of readers. Boyd states that "[b]ecause fear is a biological mechanism to get people's attention, we see people turning to fear as a tool to get people's attention," specifically in an attempt to receive "views" or "hits" on their stories. Unfortunately, this

seems to be a very useful tactic, as the stories and headlines that cause the most fear tend to be the most popular. In this way, attention and fear go hand in hand.

Television news networks such as CNN utilize social media and fear to grab the attention of viewers, just as Boyd suggests. CNN's Instagram, in particular, supports Boyd's claim. A recurring universal fear in our society is the inevitable end. Whether it be according to the Mayan calendar or threats of unexpected rapture, the world seems bound to succumb at some point. CNN plays on the fear of the general population with an Instagram picture regarding when doomsday is going to come. The image's caption reads, "The world may be closer to doomsday. That's the message from the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, which moved its iconic Doomsday Clock up two minutes. What do you think about this news? You can read more at CNN.com/World" (see Fig. 1).



Figure. 1

This image, (one that seems to be created by CNN themselves) was posted on CNN's Instagram, which has around 407,000 followers, all people who potentially came across this image, including the 3000 people who "liked" it. This alone gives the image value in the attention economy: by posting an image to such a large number of people, CNN is already deeming this photo as important solely based on the amount of people that are going to see it. In the caption for the image, CNN provides a link that leads to an article on their site, which thousands of people read daily, giving people more access to the story. In addition, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, with 11,500 followers, tweeted the cause for the shift in this "doomsday clock"; the tweet received over 100 retweets. This does not take into consideration the

possibly thousands of people who saw this image by CNN and the tweet from Bulletin of Atomic Scientists without liking or retweeting it. The image that has clearly been making its rounds across all categories of social media displays a daunting photo of a clock with hands that seem to be made of missiles.

This post is a definitive example of how media uses fear to grab the attention of viewers. Boyd suggests that “there is a long history of news media leveraging fear to grab attention,” and CNN’s instagram post is one example. With this post, CNN is playing on the fear that the world is going to end at some point, in order to get a large amount of readers to their site. This is clear, for the link to their website directly follows the caption to their image of a clock with earth as a backdrop, and nuclear missiles as the hands of the clock. CNN, as well as the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists themselves, cite the use of nuclear weapons in our society as one of the causes for the change in the doomsday clock, thus why the hands are missiles. However, this image interestingly does not appear anywhere in any article posted by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists (cited for calling the change of the “clock” into action) possibly furthering Boyd’s statement that the media overdramatizes information to get viewers’ attention, usually as a result of causing fear. Just as Boyd argues, the media is using social media and frightening headlines to draw in the attention of viewers.

However, with this image, CNN focuses on a specific part of the issue that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists brings up in order to create a more dramatic effect for viewers. According to a press release on the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists website, “[i]n 2015, unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernizations, and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity.” This quotation cites climate change as a major cause for the change in the “doomsday clock,” but climate change does not appear on the image created by CNN. CNN’s main focus with this image seems to be to strike fear and grab the attention of viewers; in order to do that, whatever they were posting for the public needs to be able to evoke certain feelings, feelings strong enough to keep the attention of readers while also convincing them to share their fear and curiosity with others. The idea of nuclear war in general evokes fear in our society today, an idea much more tangible

and directly consequential than melting ice caps, thus making missiles more inherently scary. Boyd reiterates this idea by acknowledging that “fear is especially powerful in an environment where available attention is limited.” News outlets such as CNN rely on the recognition and feedback of its viewers in order to thrive and be successful, and apparently, utilizing fear over accuracy allows for a more prosperous headline. To further the idea of using fear as a tool for attention, Steven Pinker, a Harvard college professor and experimental psychologist, and Andrew Mack, the Director of the Human Security Report Project share the notion that the media (whether social or the news) inflates their stories in such a way to attract more attention from viewers. Pinker and Mack note that, “reporters give lavish coverage to gun bursts, explosions, and viral videos, oblivious to how representative they are and apparently innocent of the fact that many were contrived as journalistic bait.” According to Pinker and Mack, journalists purposely over-exaggerate stories for a more drastic effect, tending to result in more viewers and greater general interest.

In CNN’s pictorial representation of the shift in the doomsday clock on their instagram account, they fail to acknowledge the large role climate change contributed as well. CNN seems to believe that climate change does not make enough of an evident impact on people’s lives, thus not causing fear and not bringing attention to their stories. However, what do the experts have to say about climate change? According to W. Neil Adger, a renowned professor of human geography with over 171 publications, “climate change represents not only the greatest market failure of all time, but also one of the most contentious issues of global governance, and an issue of human rights” (276). With that said, there is proof that climate change is an extreme issue, showing that CNN must have had a different reason for withholding any information on it. Knowing this information, the next question becomes, though climate change is seemingly a very real issue, does that automatically mean that people fear and care about it?

Interestingly, although climate change seems like a very important issue according to researchers, many people cannot grasp its severity. According to Kirsti Häkkinen and Nazar Akrami, researchers who designed an experiment testing why some people weren’t interested in climate change, “many individuals still deny climate change” (62). This denial can be attributed to a variety of things: a lack of exposure and

understanding of climate change leading to disbelief or simply plain old neglect, to name a few. Häkkinen and Akrami based their experiment on two distinguishable forms of denial—“denial of human effect and denial of seriousness”—and they found that both forms of denial were present in test subjects (63). Denial of human effect is the inability to realize how humans have sped up the effects of global warming, and denial of seriousness is the inability to realize how large of an issue global warming really is. For their experiment, Häkkinen and Akrami performed two studies utilizing test subjects randomly recruited through a website. In the first study, they simply presented test subjects with a questionnaire with questions based on the statement “climate warming is natural and not due to human influence”; test subjects were asked to answer the questions from a range of 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) (63). The majority of the results pointed towards climate change denial. In the second study, test subjects were split into two groups. The first group was presented with a short video clearly explaining human impact on climate change and the seriousness of the issue, while the second group was presented with a word-sorting task that was unrelated to climate. The results predictably revealed that the people in the first group who were more knowledgeable about climate change had less denial about it (64). This shows just how complex issues really are: they can have many different angles and perspectives; it is not simply that people are in denial of climate change, but that they don’t understand it.

The conjunction of Danah Boyd’s article and CNN’s instagram post emphasizes how the media exploits social networking for the attention of users by causing trepidation, even at the cost of valuable information. CNN focuses on the more unambiguously terrifying information provided by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in an attempt to solely get viewers, disregarding the fact that they are leaving out vital news: that climate change has also had a huge effect on the change in the doomsday clock. Perhaps CNN did not include any information on climate change because people are in denial of it. However, there seems to be many degrees of denial. This connection suggests that news networks will skew information to get viewers, proving Boyd’s notion that “fear and attention are tightly intertwined.” It is evident that news organizations have turned social media into a way of compelling unsuspecting users to be interested in their stories.

So what really are the challenges to being informed? I have found that the extensive perspectives and meanings for information may make it hard to always be accurately informed. For example, the term “denial” which authors use to describe people’s inability to understand or care about climate change has two very different applications. Denial of climate change can mean that someone does not actually believe the issue is happening because they do not understand it fully, thus they cannot grasp it; yet people can also be in denial of human contribution to climate change, believing that it is more of a natural occurrence bound to happen. Concepts that are complicated and hard to understand are less likely to be endorsed. In addition to denial, social media presents everyday people with an extreme amount of information, some true and some untrue. Social media’s sheer vastness makes it hard to decipher the valid stories from ones that simply generate fear. In our society today, an inability to understand or determine whether or not an issue is true results in disbelief, and disbelief presents a serious obstacle to being informed.

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