

Assignment 1

Title:

The Influence of Facebook on Climate Change-Truth or Lies (Final Conference Paper 1)

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Assignment 1: NET204

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The influence of Facebook on Climate Change

(Truth or Lies ?)

By Gerard Thomas

27/04/2020

Abstract

This paper is flagging the issue of the impact of Facebook as a lead platform in social media on climate change knowledge and concerns, whilst Facebook provides a source of awareness information; the key issue is misinformation and the drivers behind those responsible for this misinformation.

Facebook is culpable in that it does very little to regulate the information being posted, it allows the right to opinion-ship but lacks credible censorship of sensationalist ideas and content likely to cause fear rather than educate and considering a “view” is counted after just 3 seconds and videos play automatically, the stats on Facebook reveal little on factual measurement of content rather numbers and volume.

Thesis

Climate change is an emotive and politically charged topic that has divided communities over multiple campaigns and debates, (1) “Social media platforms have been used to coordinate rescue and relief operations in the aftermath of climate change–related disasters, as well as to organize movements and campaigns about climate change. However, most research about climate change communication in social media spaces are based on quantitative analysis of tweets from Western countries” (Tandoc, E.C& Eng, N. 2017,p47)

Facebook is one of the most heavily used mediums on the subject (21.18 billion visits March 2109-source Facebook) therefore the influence on Climate Change actions and attitudes is subjective to what is posted in an unregulated media. The purpose of this paper is not to prove or disprove Climate change but to challenge the way information on the subject is handled and delivered on Facebook.

Introduction

Facebook provides an ideal platform for climate activism, recently Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old who struck a chord with millions with resulting social reactions including strikes, social backlash against governments and prominently featured extreme activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Get Up creating public social disturbances to further distort the information of climate change.

Climate change is one of the many major issues facing our world today, political tensions with North Korea, the global Corona Virus Pandemics, wars in the Middle East and the influence it has on the world's energy prices. Apart from the recent pandemic, it would be fair to say not many issues have garnered so much debate and springing up of social movement organisations than we have seen before as is the climate change phenomena.

“Successful climate change modelling must reflect what people and organizations actually do. Yet, to date, most climate mitigation assessments have tended to mischaracterize the behaviour of the economic agents whose decisions ultimately affect the planet’s climate”. Much of this mischaracterization stems from known deficiencies in neoclassical economic theory, with its overly narrow reliance on unrealistic and unsubstantiated assumptions about the characteristics of consumers and firms.”(2) (John A. “Skip” Laitner, Stephen J. De Canio Irene Peters 2000)

Perhaps for many, scientist showing charts, complex data and graphs of climate change, for the average Facebook user is something they may quickly lose interest from a lack of understanding (stating this subjectively) but a protest backed by a cause especially with the innocence of youth demanding answers, a group apparently disrupting the day to day flow of life telling us all to be scared, gets the headline.

Ironically Thunberg called for governments and leaders to listen to the scientists, but it is her creativity that that captivated the audience but was anyone listening to the message intended?

Supporting Arguments

Michael Mann of Pennsylvania State University a well-known Climate Scientist stated ““When it comes to efforts to avert catastrophic climate change, Facebook is no ally. They are an enemy.” And “Facebook was criticized for refusing to take down a doctored video of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in late May. In a statement to the *Washington Post*, Facebook defended its refusal to remove the video by saying: “We don’t have a policy that stipulates

that the information you post on Facebook must be true.” That policy is a welcome mat for climate deniers.” (3) (Mann, M. 2019)

A prominent Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe posted a link to ThinkProgress an article on Twitter. “The article doesn’t even mention how [Facebook] quietly classified ‘clean energy’ and ‘climate change’ as political topics last summer.” After that, Hayhoe said she could no longer use Facebook to promote her “Global Weirding” climate-change videos, which are produced by KTTZ Texas Tech Public Media, to friends of people who liked her Facebook page. “I can’t unless I apply to be a political entity,” she said, “which I will not, because science isn’t blue or red.”(4) (Stover. D, 2019)

Facebook along with Twitter, You tube and a few other social media platforms were targeted by the US Justice Department July 2019 who launched an antitrust review of their practices; as per the Justice department review the investigation will investigate whether these companies “are engaging in practices that have reduced competition, stifled innovation, or otherwise harmed consumers.” Whilst the investigation is not specifically aimed around climate change climate misinformation the department may find recourse if any violations are identified, this is evidence that Facebooks conduct and activities have raised enough concern and feedback to prompt a Federal investigation in the USA.

To demonstrate the case in point, it was disappointing when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg struck out badly on the Recode Interview with journalist Kara Swisher when Zuckerberg defended the rights of Facebook users to publish Holocaust denial posts, saying he didn’t “think that they’re intentionally getting it wrong”.(5)(Swisher, K. 2018)

Influencers and Social Media

To explain the interrelationship between influencers and social media this extract from Climatic Change 2016 states “individuals can act as ‘opinion leaders’ who spread public messages through social networks via a ‘two-step flow’ of communication (6) (Katz 1957, p61-78).

Opinion leadership processes are evident in online social networks (7) (Choi 2015p696-711), and have informed online climate change campaigns such as Al Gore’s BWe initiative (8) (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009). “

Opinion Leadership in itself bears an immediate issue for those seeking facts, a phrase coined by US Republican Bill Bullard says “Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge, it requires no accountability, no understanding” with this statement in mind I would challenge anyone following climate change activism on Facebook to work out how much of the climate change movement is opinion and how much is fact.

Following on from the first point in the Climatic Change article “Second, in line with the theories of identity protective cognition (e.g. Cohen 2003) and cultural cognition (e.g. Kahan et al. 2007), communicating about an issue within social networks that hold shared values may increase an issue’s perceived importance. Third, interpersonal communication can

shape perceptions of in-group norms (e.g. Kashima et al. 2013b), which influence pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Cialdini et al. 1990).

Finally, the transmission of second-hand information can be markedly different from the information received firsthand (e.g. Kashima 2000). Thus, if a mass-communicated climate change message is shared through extended social networks, the information passed on may differ from the original message. Therefore, it is critical to look specifically at interpersonal communication to identify the types of information that are likely to diffuse throughout society (9) (e.g., Kashima 2000, 2008, 2014).

This source of information highlights key words, “opinion”, “perceived importance”, “second-hand information” and stating the information once passed through the social network may well be different to the original message, these are key pieces of evidence pointing to the unreliability of Facebook in regards to Climate change information and representation.

Besides the activists, influencers and contributors there is another line of climate action “supporter” on Facebook, some major oil and gas fuel companies have spent millions of dollars to fight against climate regulations but selling to the marketing on being climate aware and promoting a low carbon footprint via Facebook through funding community groups. These oil and energy companies have demonstrated poor level of public advertising within Facebook, the unclear methods and rules of censorship have allowed further misinformation to be generated at this corporate level on Facebook

A report by Influence Map.org cited in reference to the Paris Agreement “This research finds that, in the three years following the Paris Agreement, the five largest publicly-traded oil and gas majors (ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron, BP and Total) have invested over \$1Bn of shareholder funds on misleading climate-related branding and lobbying.

These efforts are overwhelmingly in conflict with the goals of this landmark global climate accord and designed to maintain the social and legal license to operate and expand fossil fuel operations. “and states damningly “a new study of Facebook’s advertising disclosure platform suggests oil companies and their trade groups have spent \$17m directly on political social media advertisements since May 2018.

The Guardian tells us that “ExxonMobil spent \$9.6m – by far the biggest sum – ConocoPhillips \$910,000 and BP \$790,000. (10)(InfluenceMap.org Oct2019), Last year BP donated \$13m to a campaign, also supported by Chevron, that successfully stopped a carbon tax in Washington state – \$1m of which was spent on social media ads, research shows.”

Freedom of speech, or not?

Digital platforms do not provide full censorship nor where they ever intended to, Facebook and other social media platforms are about numbers of users like any internet-based business, they run sets of algorithms that measure and determine what we see.

Facebook has some measures to report hate speech and other categories defining inappropriate content but misses the mark on many subjects with activist being able to post extreme views. A report by Time Magazine examined how Facebook's algorithms worked and found "The algorithms Facebook currently uses to remove hate speech only work in certain languages. That means it has become easier for Facebook to contain the spread of racial or religious hatred online in the primarily developed countries and communities where global languages like English, Spanish and Mandarin dominate."

Climate Change Deniers are targeted by Facebook Climate change supporters with many calling for censorship even some posts demanding that climate change denial be made illegal, irrespective of their view I would question why freedom of speech is not extended to these groups, opposing views are meant to be healthy for debate in search of the truth.

Global Environmental Change (volume 32) explains the issue for both sides, "the political nature of matters of concern is disavowed to the extent that the facts in themselves are elevated, through a short-circuiting procedure, on to the terrain of the political" (11)(Swyngedouw, 2010, p. 217, see also Machin, 2013).

This reflects a wider tendency in environmental political commentary to underestimate the 'ideological and social theoretical underpinnings of the environmental debate' (Manno, 2004, p. 156). For Hulme 'disagreements about climate change are as likely to reveal conflicts within and between societies about the ideologies that we carry and promote, as they are to be rooted in contrary readings of the scientific evidence' (Hulme, 2009, p. 33)

This are relevant in how they are played out on Facebook with those who would be seen to profit from the fearmongering, think Al Gore who already predicted the worlds end and missed, has changed the alarm from global cooling, then to warming and now just climate change,.

"An example of his power was shown when physicist Dr. William Happer, then Director of Energy Research at the Department of Energy, testified before Congress in 1993 that scientific data did not support the hypothesis of manmade global warming. Gore saw to it that Happer was immediately fired. Fifteen years later, Happer quipped, "I had the privilege of being fired by Al Gore, since I refused to go along with his alarmism. I did not need the job that badly."(Lehr, J. Harris, T.2018) Gore still fuels his views on Facebook with his own pages and site,

Evidence Based

President Trump coined the expression "Fake News" this is real and detrimental effect on the user trying to find out what is real when combing through the vast landscape of Climate

Change view and opinions on Facebook, contributors passionate about Climate change for or against can mount some legitimate and well-presented pages and sites that feel authoritative, the use of words and images can be very powerful in conveying the message and can change very quickly.

To illustrate this, point the examples below show A, B and C as fake news and D, E F as



A



B



C



D



E



F

legitimate sources of news from six Facebook news posts on Climate Change (Lutze. L, Drummond. C, Slovic. P, Arvai. J Sept 2019)

A study conducted by the authors titled Fake vs Real News enlisted participants to select which ones were real or fake, keeping in mind Facebook uses tags, likes and shares that influence the readers judgement. (Sept 2018), based on the outcome of the study that engaged 2287 participants and using various forms of measurement and algorithmics the participants were guided to answer the following questions “The questions were: (1) Do I recognize the news organization that posted the story?; (2) Does the information in the post seem believable?; (3) Is the post written in a style that I expect from a professional news organization?; and (4) Is the post politically motivated? These guidelines reflected common recommendations for identifying fake news”

“In addition to critical thinking, our results suggest that motivated reasoning also contributes to a person’s evaluation of fake news. We know that, when confronted with information that is inconsistent with deeply held beliefs or ideological viewpoints, people are often motivated to reject it in favor of information that is more closely aligned with their preexisting beliefs (12)(Taber and Lodge, 2006).

Along these lines, our results show that the more politically conservative a participant was, the more likely they were to trust fake climate news and mistrust real climate news. But, despite the powerful effect of motivated reasoning, our interventions led doubters of climate change to trust, like, and share fake climate news to a lesser degree”. (13)(Lutzke, L., Drummond, C., Slovic, P. and Árvai, J., 2019.)

Conclusion

From the argument presented and the research only touched on in this paper, we see the way Climate Change information is delivered on Facebook is influenced by drivers that cannot be contained by any regulatory methods. Contributors post opinions among facts and the effort to discern which is which is laborious and takes skilled researchers in depth studies to sift through the material.

As a user without any skills in analysing meta data and climate change source data, if not using asocial learning, how can the average Facebook user be confident in knowing what they are reading is fact or opinion, validated or made up?

Dr Tim Dean expresses this view “Not long ago, if you had a penchant for conspiracy theories, racial vilification or fringe anti-science theories, you’d be hard pressed to find enough like-minded nutjobs in your neighbourhood to hold a bi-monthly tin foil hat dinner. Now, you can join with thousands of like-minded cranks from all around the world on a daily basis to reinforce and radicalise your views.”

“There’s also evidence that a group of people with diverse views will tend to gravitate towards the most extreme views in the group. And that people who believe one conspiracy theory tend to believe in and share many. And that cultivating outrage only promotes more animosity towards one’s perceived opponents and encourages greater retributive invective and bad faith”.

Many Facebook posts can be considered controversial and much like the spread of gossip in any community will generate a multitude of stories and participants, facts are not so exciting, controversy laced with emotion can be. It is not a new concept and existed long before Facebook. Whilst free speech should enable us to seek out the truth, more often than not I find if you do not agree with popular opinion, you are quickly vilified and ostracised by other free thinkers, based on my own personal experience. (I.e. politics at election time).

Australia’s Attorney General George Brandis describes this paradox where climate change activists dismiss and isolate deniers instead of inviting intellectual debate, “The great irony to this new “habit of mind”, [Brandis] says, is that the eco-correct think of themselves as enlightened and their critics as “throwbacks”, when actually “they themselves are the throwbacks, because they adopt this almost theological view, this cosmology that eliminates from consideration the possibility of an alternative opinion”. The moral straitjacketing of anyone who raises a critical peep about eco-orthodoxies is part of a growing “new secular public morality” this does not prove or disprove the activists’ or denier’s belief but how the imbalance has played out in the social media realm at a political level..

Until Facebook, if ever has some form of regulation, people copying the influencers behaviour unless it is asocial learning, are vulnerable and subject to conformity of the masses and may find themselves in a more hostile social media climate than the real one they were so concerned with in the first place.

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