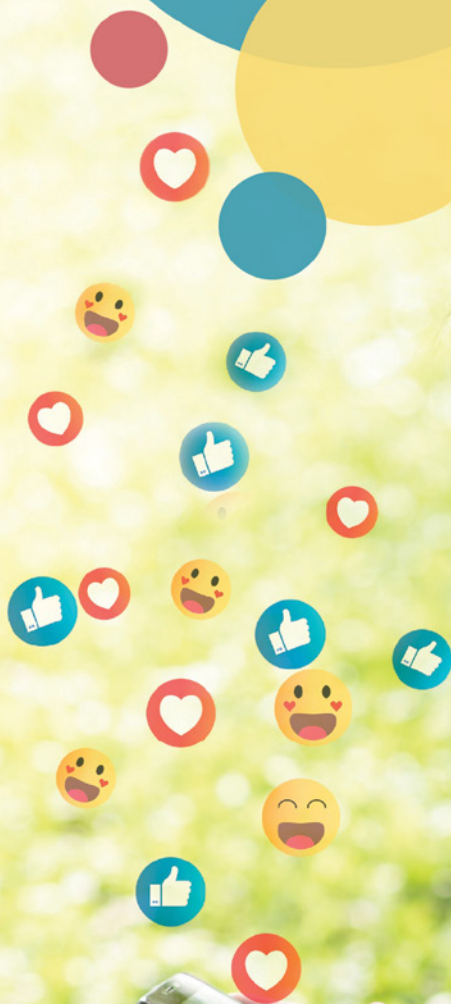


Social Media

Does the
Good
Outweigh
the Bad?



John Allen



About the Author

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Chapter One

Information and Misinformation on Social Media

From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the early weeks of 2020, questions arose on social media about the origins of the virus. A consensus quickly formed among scientists that COVID-19 had passed from an infected animal to a human—an event called zoonotic spillover—at a wet market in Wuhan, China. This explanation became so widely agreed on that dissenting views were often flagged or banned on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, as misinformation.

Nonetheless, several experts disagreed with the consensus view. They believed that the COVID-19 virus was created during research in a Wuhan laboratory and then somehow escaped through a security breach. They pointed out that the Wuhan Institute of Virology, located just 8 miles (13 km) from the wet market, was known to perform research on bat viruses like the ones related to COVID-19. People who supported this lab-leak theory were dismissed as cranks and conspiracy theorists. They were even accused of being anti-Chinese and racist. In February 2021 Facebook

doubled down on policing its site and banning these supposedly debunked claims. Yet just three months later, Facebook did an about-face. “In light of ongoing investigations into the origin of Covid-19 and in consultation with public health experts,” the company said, “we will no longer remove the claim that Covid-19 is man-made from our apps.”⁴

A Divide on How Content Is Policed

Some blasted Facebook for opening its platform to blatant conspiracy theories. But those who found the lab-leak theory to be plausible felt vindicated. The tide of inquiry began to shift in their favor. In July 2021 President Joe Biden created a commission to study the issue in detail. Critics insisted that the social media ban on the lab-leak theory had already done damage. Among these critics was the Silicon Valley investor and tech entrepreneur David Sacks. “By censoring the lab leak theory for a year, Twitter and Facebook protected the fake zoonotic theory by eliminating its main competition in the marketplace of ideas,” tweeted Sacks. “In this way, social media censorship helps to spread disinformation, not fight it.”⁵ Social media was blamed for cutting off an important debate and making it more difficult to discover the truth.

In February 2023 the US Department of Energy declared that a lab leak is the most likely source for COVID-19’s origin. Whatever theory people accept, the controversy shows how quickly battle lines can be drawn on social media when something crucial is at stake. Often the divide is between those who want social media to police their sites more aggressively and those who favor a more open marketplace of ideas and opinions.

“By censoring the lab leak theory for a year, Twitter and Facebook protected the fake zoonotic theory by eliminating its main competition in the marketplace of ideas. In this way, social media censorship helps to spread disinformation, not fight it.”⁵

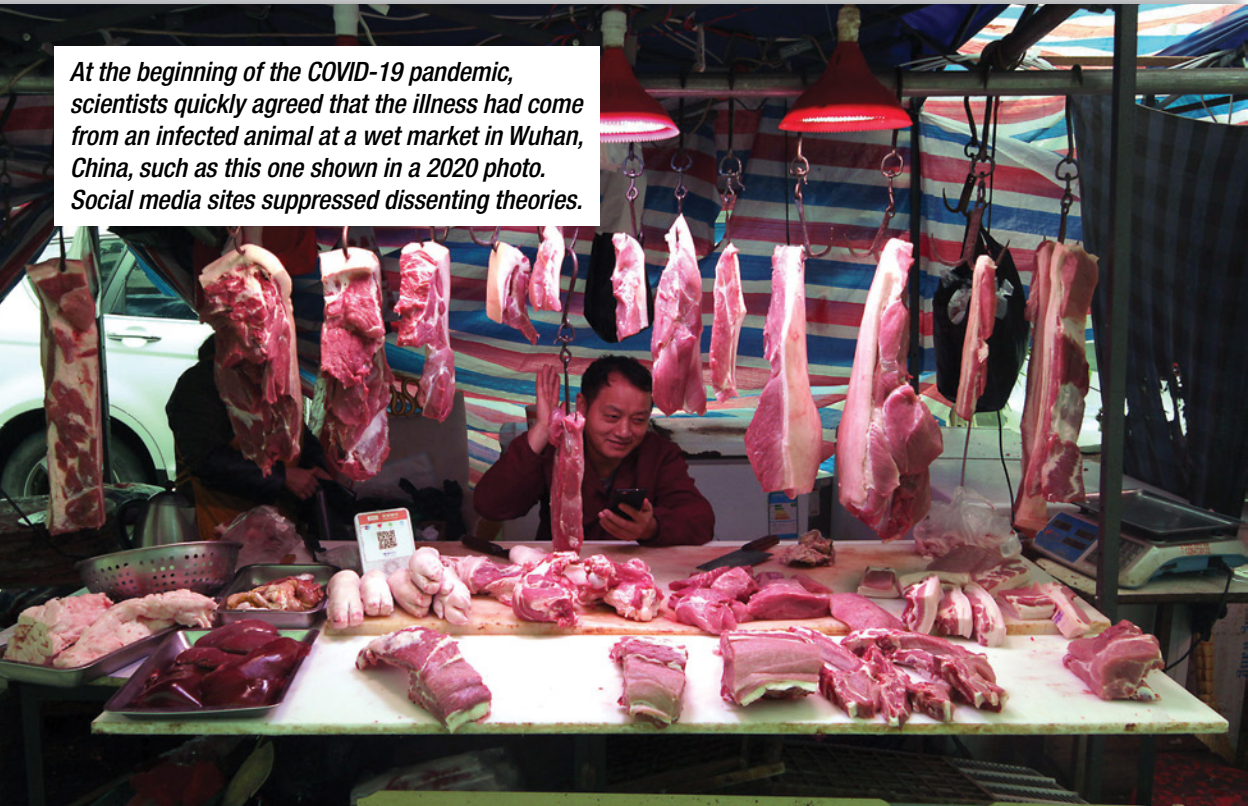
—David Sacks, Silicon Valley investor and tech entrepreneur

A World of Information at One's Fingertips

It is often said that owning a smartphone gives a person access to the history of human knowledge. Some cultural critics say this hardly matters since most people use their phones almost exclusively to send texts, watch funny videos, and play games. But to a surprising extent, social media does serve as a digital town square, where users can gather online to learn the latest news and comment on it. Social media serves this function for billions of people worldwide.

According to an April 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center, more than 70 percent of North Americans use social media to obtain information and share it with others. Half use social media as their primary news source either often or sometimes. One in five adults in the United States get their political news from social media. A study by the *New York Times* Consumer Insight Group found that one of the key motivations for using social media is to share valuable and entertaining content. Although YouTube and Facebook remain the most popular online platforms for Americans,

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists quickly agreed that the illness had come from an infected animal at a wet market in Wuhan, China, such as this one shown in a 2020 photo. Social media sites suppressed dissenting theories.



other sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn boast user bases numbering in the hundreds of millions. Information flows through these sites nonstop, twenty-four hours a day. In pursuit of clickbait—or hooking curious users—sites tend to highlight the most outrageous or emotional stories, often with a strong negative slant. These stories are also shared the most.

This flood of information on social media can be overwhelming. For some people, it literally becomes too much. During the pandemic the constant focus on negative news left many people feeling anxious and helpless. Social media often serves to emphasize these feelings. As Charlotte Huff of the American Psychological Association observes:

This leads to suffering from, as [Los Angeles psychologist Don] Grant describes it, “media saturation overload,” and he is not the only mental health professional noticing this specialized type of stress. Similar terms that have emerged recently include “doomscrolling,” “headline anxiety,” and “headline stress disorder.” While these terms are newer, the psychological strain of living through and absorbing dismal news is by no means confined to recent years. But lately, said Grant and other psychologists, the steady drumbeat of headlines and related social media commentary has been without pause: an ongoing pandemic, racial injustice, climate change, election controversy, mass shootings, and the list extends onward.⁶

To ease stress related to negative news, psychologists recommend that people set up their own social media guardrails. This might include limiting social media checks to fifteen minutes or not bringing a smartphone to the dinner table. However, the goal should be moderation, not a total cutoff. According to therapist Steven Stosny, “If you try to go cold turkey, your imagination of what might be happening tends to be worse than what actually is happening.”⁷

Solving Problems and Learning with Social Media

Of course, social media is much more than just a source of anxiety. Its abundance of information and shared advice also helps people cope with the modern world. When users on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram see how friends manage to solve their problems, it makes them feel more connected to a community and more capable of dealing with their own daily challenges. A January 2020 study at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that routine use of social media helps compensate for fewer face-to-face interactions in people's busy lives. Young people in particular seem to draw strength from sharing stories online of overcoming personal problems. Often they are surprised to learn how many others have experienced the same issues.

Moreover, social media offers lots of practical information to solve problems. YouTube is filled with free videos showing how to make household repairs or check for safety hazards at home or work.

A woman practices CPR. CPR can be learned by taking a class, but free CPR tutorials can also be found on YouTube.



Using Artificial Intelligence to Stop Misinformation on Social Media

It has become a cliché that fake news and toxic content travel faster than the truth on social media. But could high-powered computers hold the key to stopping the spread of misinformation? Lyric Jain, founder and CEO of Logically, believes that artificial intelligence (AI) could sort through the constant avalanche of tweets, posts, and videos to separate the truth from fake news.

Jain, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Cambridge University, founded Logically in 2017. The company's AI algorithms, which are basically detailed problem-solving instructions, process natural language to understand and analyze text. AI can instantly compare social media content or articles with similar material from more than one hundred thousand sources. It then labels the content with ratings of low, medium, or high credibility. Questionable items can be flagged for a human fact-checker to examine. The AI algorithms can also be programmed to analyze images and statistics and to block obscene material.

Sifting through false claims on social media has become Logically's most important service. "Our AI models identify claims and rank them based on credibility and accuracy," says Jain. "If claims have been checked before, a result can be given almost instantly."

Quoted in Karam Filfilan, "How Logically Uses AI—and Humans—to Tackle Misinformation," Sifted, April 9, 2021. <https://sifted.eu>.

There are tutorials for administering cardiopulmonary resuscitation, bandaging wounds, and treating a snake bite. Useful knowledge that once required hours of study or special training is now available at the click of a mouse or the touch of a smartphone screen.

Many videos offer step-by-step lessons in performing all sorts of stunts and skills, from doing cartwheels or dancing the Renegade to playing the ukulele or juggling. More than 720,000 hours of video are uploaded to the site each day, covering a wide variety of skills to be learned. Some videos, such as TED talks (for technology, entertainment, and design), feature world-renowned experts lecturing on everything from Renaissance painting to quantum physics.

Misinformation and How It Spreads

Amid the blizzard of information that is shared every day on social media, it is inevitable that a certain amount of misinformation

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