Misinformation and Disinformation in the Age of Social Media

We hear all the time today about disinformation and misinformation being spread online. This article or that article is labelled as fake news, and the different issues of the day are so heavily politicised that you can hear two completely different versions of the same event. With social media and the internet, all these differing news and stories are right at our fingertips for us to access whatever side of the issue it is that we want to hear.

How to navigate this mess of news and opinion? Arriving at the truth of the matters being presented should be the goal of all Catholics. [1] The Truth is what we should be always aiming to find. That way, we can grow closer to Christ and live better Christian lives.[2] So how can we sift through all the misinformation out there, and arrive with a well-rounded view which will allow us to see the world and the issues in it, in the correct light?

There is a dizzying amount of different and contradicting information out there about any given issue, which I'm sure everyone has experienced! COVID, the vaccines, climate change, the war in Ukraine. You have different people coming at it from all angles, all of them sure that their point of view is the correct one. The fact that people holding contradicting viewpoints can be fully convinced in their own minds that they're right, is a big part of the problem, and often makes you wonder how this even happens in the first place.

A big part of the answer to this question is the very nature of social media itself. A few years back a documentary came out called "The Social Dilemma".[3] It details how the algorithms that are used to help bring people closer together on social media actually end up controlling us as well, and strongly influence how we think about issues.

Social media is designed to bring people closer together. You connect with your friends and follow those who think like you do. This can be good, but unfortunately when it comes to issues affecting the world, because you're connected with people who think like you do, you're constantly bombarded with viewpoints which only present one side of the issue. We all love hearing other people thinking like us and telling us our viewpoint is correct, so the social media algorithms provide us with more and more opinions which back our point of view up. What ends up happening is we get stuck in a social media bubble where we largely hear only viewpoints that we agree with.

The majority of people don't realise this, so when they finally hear a differing opinion on an issue, their natural instinct is to push these people away as outliers, as radicals holding a differing viewpoint that no one else does. The unfortunate thing is that these people feel the same way in reverse!

This is one of the reasons why the divide we see in politics and around the world now is so big. Everyone derides the other side as "crazy" and "radical" because in this age of social media, it's so rare that you actually get to meet and hear the other side properly. You get stuck in your own bubble of opinions with people who think like you do, and interaction with other "bubbles" is getting rarer and rarer. Social media exploits this phenomenon, and keeps pushing people further apart.

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[1] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Section 198 ("Truth"), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_200605 26_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Truth

[2] John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life"

[3] https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/

That's why, when there is some actual disinformation and misinformation being pushed around, many people believe it, because in their "bubble" everyone else who they interact with believes it as well. To them, they don't feel at all like some outlier. Everyone else is the outlier!

How do we resolve this problem? Some people say we need to censor those who push misinformation and try to shut them off from having any voice. However, many people hold the other view and say that to people who hold the viewpoints being censored, this is just further evidence to them that their viewpoint is the correct one which is being silenced by the other side, and the misinformation will always find some other outlet.

A good answer to this problem would be having a reliable media which could present both sides of an argument objectively, in order that individuals could have all the data necessary to make an informed decision to serve the common good. In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the Church says

> "In all three areas — the message, the process and structural issues — one fundamental moral principle always applies: the human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media".[4]

An ideal media should be able to help us out in solving these issues, but unfortunately, that's not what we always see in our current world. Unfortunately, all too often a secular media falls prey to the intrinsic difficulties of communication

> "In the world of the media the intrinsic difficulties of communications are often exacerbated by ideology, the desire for profit and political control, rivalry and conflicts between groups, and other social evils."[5]

And so even with the mainstream media, we often need to be careful who we're listening too and where we're getting our information from, and making sure that we truly are hearing both sides and getting an objective view of the issues.

The actual answer to the problem is a lot more difficult to implement, and it starts with ourselves. We need to take a step back from social media, realise the way that it works to herd people into bubbles, and take action to address that in our own lives. Instead of interacting with just the people who agree with us through social media, we need to go out into the real world and have civil discussions with those who we disagree with. We need to seek alternative viewpoints, and in light of all the information we can gather on a topic from both sides, we need to make informed decisions. We need to talk to people who we wouldn't normally talk to and put ourselves in situations where we're not as comfortable, in order to learn more and see things from another's point of view. Instead of being worried about misinformation spreading, we need to bring it all into the light, so that everyone can see it for what it actually is.

When the information is out there for all to see, it's much easier to recognise false narratives and disinformation. And this is what the Catholic Church teaches as well regarding information. In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, She says

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[4] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Section 416 ("Information and Democracy"), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_200605 26_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Information%20and%20democracy

[5] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Section 416 ("Information and Democracy"), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_200605 26_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Information%20and%20democracy

> "*Information is among the principal instruments of democratic participation*. Participation without an understanding of the situation of the political community, the facts and the proposed solutions to problems is unthinkable. It is necessary to guarantee a real pluralism in this delicate area of social life, ensuring that there are many forms and instruments of information and communications."[6]

Instead of hiding behind the screen of our mobile device and arguing with faceless humans on the internet who we don't know, we need to have face-to-face discussions in the real world. "He who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him" (Proverbs 18:17).

Now it's easy to say this in theory. To actually have a world in which people are willing to discuss and learn from each other is much harder in practice - and it can also teach us that we aren't always right! But like the Church says, it is the ideal which we should aim for as Christians. Discussions like this allow us all to grow, and it gives us an opportunity to evangelise and share the faith which we hold.

And that, in the end, is the most important thing: following Christ's "Great Commission" to share His good news to the world.[7] And if we can bring to light disinformation and misinformation in the process, so much the better!

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[6] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Section 414 ("Information and Democracy"), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_200605 26_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Information%20and%20democracy
[7] Matthew 28:16-20