Rural community and vulnerability to post-truth exploitation

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Abstract: The impetus at which consciousness has been coaxed into a 'post-truth' way of being over the last decade of the information age is a worthy content on a research agenda. In relation, the slow scholarship movement has gained momentum as a response to contemporary post-truth discourses. The post-truth way may be typified by a presentation of information which manifests in the form of sensationalist, fast-paced, knee-jerk reaction to issues. It can be characterized by a failure to assess veracity through a rigorous evaluation of evidence. Unfortunately, time does not permit to question beyond to ensure that uttered words are consistent with integrity or moral and ethical dimensions of communication that allows truth to prevail. The slow scholarship movement implores a more thoughtful, conscientious, and ethical conduct that values quality over sensationalism. The observable direction of the post truth era bears heavily on the sculpting of public life and opinion. It has implications for governance and social policy. It has implications for peace and peace of mind, in particular. It has implications for truth and knowledge. It has existential implications. It is with slow scholarship reckoning that this paper treats a challenge of post-truth consequence. Through a review of literature and a synthesis of discourse related to post-truth associated phenomena this paper presents the framework for the study that considers vulnerability of rural communities as an exploited and oppressed segment of the post truth era. This paper recognizes that the post-truth paradigm presents a new set of complexities that need to be examined in terms of its effect on society. One of the complexities is a propensity toward an environment in which society is susceptible to manipulation and thereby the potential for exploitation is heightened.

Keywords: exploitation; information disorder; post-truth; rurality; vulnerability.

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a notable ascent in three areas of social concern. Firstly, there has been a rise in populist political culture where populist movements and politicians have gained a prominent resurgence in many parts of the world, including in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. (Cox, 2017). Secondly, the rapid advancement of technology has ushered a new era where like Pilate, humans are enquiring what is truth. This era is defined as post truth. Thirdly, the advent of the new information and computing technology have created doubting Thomas beyond measure. The celebration of unbound doubt, and resultant pursuit of all kinds of information and the interpretations have covaried with an increase in information disorder. (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). Information disorder is a defining principle of the post-truth era. Within this context, populism is a political ideology that appeals to or accentuates the rights and power of the common people, often in opposition to the elites or establishment. Populist movements often appeal to emotions and identity, rather than evidence-based arguments or policy proposals. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist movements and politicians often draw their support from marginalized communities, those who feel left behind by economic, cultural and social changes, including those who harbour a distrust in traditional political institutions. Consequently, there is a link between the election of populist leaders and support for their ideas within rural communities. (Deppisch et al., 2022). Rural communities often relate feelings of marginalization and exclusion and thus populist ideology appeals to their sense of social justice (Rickardsson, 2021).

For the purpose of this study, the perspective rise of contemporary populism, propaganda and the post-truth era, become a symbiotic phenomenon that correlates and bolsters each other and makes the whole something else than the sum of its parts. A post-truth way of thinking and being among other defining features is a paradigm in which it becomes acceptable for what 'feels' to be true as indispensable to discern what can be 'proven' to be true. Rather

than traditional methods of evaluating claims against objectively verifiable evidence, the post-truth outlook positions emotional responses and personal biases as equitable value, if not at a higher value, to objective and demonstrable proofs. This trend has resulted in blurred lines between truth, fact, opinion, contradiction, and a loss of respect for the importance of truthful information. The post-truth paradigm correlates with a high prevalence of information disorder. The thriving of information disorder results in an environment where there is much circulation of bad information informing choices and actions. Closely related to information disorder is the notion of propaganda, a term that specifically describes the dissemination of biased or misleading information, with the intention to influence public opinion and behavior. In contemporary society, populist movements utilize propaganda techniques for their goals. They can capitalize on the unrestrained rapid dissemination structures of mass media systems and channels. They take particular advantage of new systems like social and media networks to satisfy their own ends. The kind of environment that is facilitated by the interconnectedness of mass media, populism, information disorder and the post-truth age presents the potential for exploitation of society through manipulation. Within this context, this study placed rural communities into context and considered their vulnerability to post-truth exploitation compared to urban communities.

Measuring and Defining Urban and Rurality Divide

The notion of rurality extends beyond the confines of physical landscape and provincial ranges. In this understanding, alongside a description of agrarian landscape, there is a panoptic consideration of the dynamics that exist within the social structure, economic activities, social relations, and cultural practices. This also includes rural engagement with the global digital landscape, rural dwellers are part rural and part global. Thus, rurality is defined as the ways in which people live, work, are connected, and interact in these landscapes. It is not merely a description of the location in which the community resides. Halfacree (2006) asserts that rural places can be understood through a "three-fold architecture" of physical, social, and representational dimensions.   The physical relates to the natural and constructional landscape. The social relates to the social relations and the systems that characterize rural way of life. The representational dimension speaks to the metaphorical and delineative representation of rurality in culture and media. The tripartite taken together are mutually constitutive and interdependent. Halfacree's framework highlights the complexity of examining rural spaces as a more nuanced conception (Halfacree, 2006).

An emerging concept of rurality includes an exhaustive information of relational interaction which encompasses the ways in which individuals live, communicate, and interact within a rustic landscape. Woods (2007) presents the argument that there needs to be a more open, dynamic and relational line of engagement in understanding rural geography. The traditional notion of rurality is evolving – globalization and rurality's engagement in its processes has played a significant role in the changes. Rural dynamics are not necessarily homogenous, they can be understood more accurately when considering the assorted collection of economic, social and cultural activities that are intertwined with urban and global dynamics. Woods proposes that by obscuring the distinctions between rural and urban areas and concentrating on the interconnection and interdependency of the rural-urban dynamic, a clearer understanding of 'rurality' and rural-urban relations may be revealed (Woods, 2007). The conceptions of rurality as interpreted above are integral to the central argument of this paper. Understanding rurality and rural communities considers more than just the location and landscape. Rurality means something more than the direct opposite of urban life. Rurality is a social conception on its own with distinctive features.

Post-truth, and a Post-truth Paradigm

The emergence of the term post-truth as a concept has gained a lot of traction in contemporary social discourse particularly within the realms of social consciousness and politics. The term implies a shift in consciousness of society where it exhibits a change in the way society has begun to evaluate truth. It is a way of being that values conjecture, emotion, intensity of feelings and self-endorsed belief as much of an indicator to evaluate truth claims than what can be defined as the traditional model of claim testing truth against objective, somewhat empirically verifiable fact. A generally accepted idea of the origin of the term 'post-truth' can be traced back to a Serbian-American playwright in "*The Watergate Syndrome: A government of Lies*" in which he tries to situate the turning away from 'truth' as a gradual reaction of growing distrust within the American population - following a series of events including the Watergate Scandal, the Vietnamese war and the war crimes thereof, the Reagan administrations' secret sale of weapons to Iran and the Gulf War. He theorizes that around this point a place of no return had been reached and inevitably on a very basic level "*free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.*". (Tesich, 1992). Since then, the term post-truth, and conceptions of post-truth theory have pervaded both public and academic language and spaces on a global scale. The phrase post-truth enjoyed a successful legitimization in 2016, when it was named the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford Dictionaries defines it as "*denoting*

circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". (Oxford University Press, 2016).

The German Language Academy's 2016 word was the term *postfaktisch*, an adjective that describes a political shift from what is truth to what is felt to be true. (Perez Curiel, 2018). While in 2017, the noun *posverdad* made it into the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy which defines the phenomena of a "*deliberate distortion of reality, which manipulates beliefs and emotions with the purpose of influencing public opinion and social attitude*s". (Perez Curiel, 2018)

The year 2016 is commonly viewed as the dawn of the public herald of post-truth era. It was a year where political post-truth posturing became so blatantly mainstream that it was hard to ignore the change in the climate. This sentiment was legitimately taken up by British journalist Matthew D'Ancona who declared 2016 to be the year that launched the era of post-truth due to a wave of populism, whose primary message devalued the truth (D'Ancona, 2017). The strategic and at times manipulative language used to sway public opinion during the United States presidential election campaign ushered in the alarm by a wider public. The public notably reacted to the trend of blatant disregard for factual accuracy coupled with provocative, emotionally charged, loaded language exhibited by media, social and political actors - toward the agenda of installing a favoured candidate. The widely publicised post-truth style rhetoric of the winning candidate while in office, brought post truth reckoning, discourse and attempts at categorisation into the fore. An older reckoning of the disposition of the collective consciousness toward post-truth behaviour may be found in "*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*,". He argues that within modernism there lay an affinity for grand and metanarratives to provide a totalizing explanation of the collective consciousness. In reaction, postmodernism demonstrated the loss of faith in such metanarratives and instead started focussing on particular, local and individual perspectives and experiences. This movement towards recognition of mutually valuable, multiplicity of perspectives led to a breaking apart of consensus with regard to what constitutes singular truth. For Lyotard, the postmodern world set the stage for post-truth conditions. (Lyotard, 2010).

Consistent with this trend of thought, it is interesting to consider how the conception of epistemic democratization applies in the context of post-truth conditions. Epistemic democratization emphasizes the importance of equal participation and representation in decision-making processes. It encapsulates the ideal that knowledge and information should be open and accessible to everyone, regardless of their social status, educational background, or cultural affiliation. It also seeks to move the gatekeeping of knowledge production and dissemination away from the traditional hierarchies and move toward a more inclusive environment for knowledge (Schwartzburg, 2015). From this point of departure, Fuller (2016) argues that a post-truth world is an inevitable outcome of epistemic democracy and claims that it may be through the greater process of epistemic democratization that the post-truth condition is borne.

Implicit in post-truth behaviour is the element of denial. Bardon explores the phenomenon of denial, through the examination of its psychological, ideological, and economic roots. He also speaks to the consequences of denial for individuals and society. For Bardon - denial can serve as a means of avoiding uncomfortable truths. His position is that denial can be motivated by cognitive biases, ideological commitments, and cognitive dissonance. The role of political, religious, and cultural ideology factors in denialism, makes it psychologically difficult for people to accept evidence that challenges their worldview. On the relationship between conspiracy theory and denial – he offers that conspiracy theory functions as a means for people to deny uncomfortable truths. With regard to denialism and science once more - he argues there is often a psychological or ideologically motivated resistance to scientific knowledge. He argues that these mechanisms can make it difficult for people to accept unpleasant or inconvenient truths resulting in the phenomenon of denial (Bardon, 2020). Consequently, the spirit of the post-truth, its phenomena and post-truth praxes in its most popularly conceived notion become an amalgamation of social conditions identified earlier in this study. The emerging social condition and ultimately conduct become a post-truth paradigm. Despite the ruminations already identified, the term has been developed through usage and scholarly examination by various public figures, social scientists, social commentators, journalists, and scholars alike. The examination among others seeks to describe the current context of public discourse, the relationship between media, politics, and the truth in the modern interconnected world. Not all scholars agree that concept of post-truth in terms of knowledge and truth is either a novel or a particularly elusive one or that it is 'a thing'.

Sismondo (2017) a philosopher of science, has written extensively on the topic of post-truth. From his point of view the concept of post-truth is a misleading and problematic one stemming from the assumption of the notion that we are currently living in a post-truth era. To be living in a post-truth era implies that there was a time when truth was more objective or reliable. His position is that this was never the case, there was never a truth era. He reckons that in its

popular conception, the term post-truth fails to acknowledge the nuanced, complex relationship between knowledge, power, and social context. For his offering - there is no such thing as unbiased types of information. Misinformation is not a new thing; however he notes that the rise of social media and other forms of digital media make it easier to spread. Sismondo implores a closer attention to the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated, and utilized in society rather than an attachment to the concept of post-truth, and commit to making these processes more democratic, transparent, and accountable. (Sismondo, 2017)

Equally important to note, the description contained in Oxford's *Word of the Year 2016* entry in the section: *A brief history of Post Truth Dictionary* – is as follows:

> "*The compound word post-truth exemplifies an expansion in the meaning of the prefix post- that has become increasingly prominent in recent years. Rather than simply referring to the time after a specified situation or event – as in post-war or post-match – the prefix in post-truth has a meaning more like 'belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant*".

Rather than concretely comparing the post-truth era to a golden age of truth era that must have come before it, it refers to a more nuanced complexity. A conception of post-truth and a post-truth paradigm refers to conditions in which there is indifference to the value of truth, or the period in which its inhabitants exist in a loose relationship to an ethic that upholds accountability to truth.

The Problem with Post-truth and Society

In a post-truth paradigm – the phenomena and conditions thereof, opens the door wide for the unchecked passage of speculative, false, and deliberate disinformation. There are serious social and ethical implications arising from accepting a post-truth condition. Establishing a post-truth norm where truth and evidence is ignored in favour of preference and belief sets up circumstances where it becomes increasingly difficult to make good, independent, objective, and informed decisions. The larger implication of this is that it may negatively impact societies' progress toward justice on the whole. When it becomes the custom to only accept information that confirms and aligns with one's pre-existing beliefs, what follows is a steady movement fostering polarization and division within society. This in turn creates conditions where finding common ground and working toward mutual goals becomes cumbersome and challenging. When society admits a post-truth model, the nature of the model allows for the proliferation of misinformation and propaganda. The repercussions of which may lead to people making decisions based on false information, and this could have dangerous consequences.

In addition, the praxis of a post-truth model can make it difficult to have productive public debates, as people may be more interested in defending their beliefs than engaging in constructive dialogue. When society shifts willingly toward a post-truth paradigm, they become vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Psychologically it is far easier to manipulate and exploit individuals through their emotions, fears, and beliefs. If what one feels to be true is more acceptable than what can be proven to be true, one's 'feelings' can lead one to irrational action. An acceptance of post-truth praxes can make manipulation and exploitation possible through all kinds of avenues that include advertising, politics, social systems, media, and social media. It therefore becomes necessary to be conscious of the potential impact of the conditions and consequences of a post-truth world. The idea is to combat post-truth manipulation by identifying its features and where it finds its most vulnerable targets. Rural residents are one of the most vulnerable targets.

Information disorder

As discussed above the workings of post-truth designates 'truthiness'[1] somewhat irrelevant and to a large extent operates through a breakdown in reliable information. Tightly bound with post-truth then, is a complicated correlation with tenuous information. To this end – this paper finds it necessary to explore the theory of Information disorder.

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[1]Merriam-Webster defines truthiness as a **"**a truthful or seemingly truthful quality that is claimed for something not because of supporting facts or evidence but because of a feeling that it is true or a desire for it to be true" https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truthiness
NOTE: While The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the roots of the word truthiness as far back as the first half of the 19th century, in contemporary usage '*truthiness'* was neologised by the political satirist Stephen Colbert of "*The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*" , who first used it in 2005 and it has gained popularity as such.

Information disorder refers to circumstances in which there is a profusion of misleading or false information circulating in the public space. The framework of information disorder was first set forth by Claire Wardle and Hussein Derakhshan in "*Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*". In terms of their conception information disorder is a collective term to describe three distinct categories of problematic information namely misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Information that is false that is presented and circulated but without a subversionary intention is what is referred to as Misinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). An example of misinformation would be something like sharing an article purporting the use of essentials oils to fragrance cosmetics as a safer, natural, and superior option to synthetic fragrances. The intention on the part of the sharers is to share information and albeit factually questionable, there is no malintent behind the sharing of that information.

Disinformation is categorised as information that is false or inaccurate and there is a deliberate purpose in circulating such information with an intention of obfuscation or deception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). An example of this would be to create and proliferate an argument piece in which false claims are made to discredit a political opponent. Another example one could offer is the conspiratorial type of social media posts sponsored by special interest groups (SIG) toward an agenda from which the SIG would benefit – something like "the covid-19 Pandemic is a false flag invention to sell vaccines". Within this category of Information disorder we could include phenomena like 'fake news' and propaganda. Malinformation is true information that is shared maliciously with the intent of causing damage or harm to reputation or person (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). An example of this would be something like publishing the private personal, details of an entity in order for the entity to be targeted in a smear or hate campaign. An example of this would be 'Revenge-Porn' or 'doxing' where true but private, material may be published without consent on the internet for malicious purposes.

Wardle and Derakhshan implicate the ubiquity of internet usage and the meteoric rise of social media as culpable enablers of information disorder. There are several features of the internet and social media that make information disorder flourish. There is an ease with which information can be created and disseminated, there is the capability of users to hide their identities and motives. The utilization of bots and trolls may proliferate or amplify disinformation at an unprecedented rate that human fact-checkers may not be able to match. Psychology and Cognitive Science make us aware that through human cognitive biases - persons may be more vulnerable to Information disorder. The algorithmic design of social media to engage and hold users, directs users to echo chambers and filter bubbles, makes people more likely to believe false information if it aligns with or endorses their pre-existing inclinations. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Propaganda and Information Disorder

It can be inferred that if Information disorder refers to the spread of false, misleading, or inaccurate information through various channels, such as social media, news outlets, or online platforms then tacit to the phenomena is the notion of propaganda. Propaganda refers to when a biased, specific goal either political or ideological, is circulated in the public sphere through a misleading and prejudicial filter, in a deliberate attempt to manipulate people's beliefs and behaviours (Hobbs, 2020). Propaganda may include both misinformation and disinformation with the intent of deception. Propaganda techniques often involve the use of persuasive or selective use of facts, false or misleading information such as spreading conspiracy theories or promoting divisive political ideologies to affect their goals. Propaganda and information disorder has a negative impact on society. It becomes urgent for individuals to be aware of its potential to manipulate consciousness. For a just society based on the workings of democratic principles – the opportunity to make democratic decisions must be made from a place of truth, it must be an objective, uncoerced position.

Information disorder and Post-truth

The interlacing between information disorder and post-truth praxes, if not already inferred, is taken for granted in media, political and communication studies. Post-truth praxes conduct itself through the contrivances of information disorder. The link between the two has been developed by a notable body of research, analyses, and commentary. Wardle and Derakhshan, make clear the tangled relationship between information disorder and post-truth praxes. Attention is drawn to the notion that the proliferation of false and misleading information makes it increasingly arduous for people to discern what is true. The proliferation of information disorder has a profound effect on the undermining of the authority of traditional information sources. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Keyes in "*The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*" explores the historical, cultural, and consequential implications of post-truth discourse in present-day society. Keyes asserts that post-truth discourse can be problematic as it can lead to the propagation of bad and false information that may destabilise democratic institutions. The Post-truth model is driven by a growing distrust in traditional sources of information and the traditional gatekeepers of information. The rise of social media and the plethora of information sources has made it more challenging for people to discern what is true and what is not true, or what to trust and what not to trust. To remediate the post-truth phenomena – it is necessary to promote critical processing of information, media literacy and thinking skills to renew faith in traditional sources of discerned information (Keyes, 2004). An examination of post-truth through discourse might help in this regard.

The ascension of post-truth politics, the effect on public discourse, and strategies for treating post-truth discourse is presented in D'Ancona's book "*Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*". It cautions that post-truth is a political phenomenon in which public appeals to emotions and personal beliefs informs public opinion. This is a clear and present danger as post-truth allowances can be manipulated to inculcate mistrust and division by politicians toward an agenda. Post-truth allows such actors to avoid accountability. Similar to Keyes assertions, it argues that post-truth presents a conceivable peril in terms of democracy, as the spread of false information corrodes trust in democratic institutions. The embracing of social media and its mechanisms create echo-chambers and filter bubbles reinforcing impolitic or ill-advised beliefs. The very foundation upon which democratic institutions operates is undermined. D'Ancona asserts that to assuage post-truth discourse it becomes necessary to implore transparency and accuracy within the political sphere as well as advocate for accountability of politicians for their rhetoric and actions (D'Ancona, 2017).

Post-truth, Information Disorder and Social Media

On the knotty relationship between information disorder and social media technology is an article in a newsletter authored by Geoffrey Baym, titled "*Is There a Cure for Information disorder?*". In its perspective the rise of 24-hour cable channels and unbounded websites with no real commitment to providing public good as much as they are concerned with propagating an agenda driven angle, alongside the turning away from local newspapers have led to circumstances where there is a dearth of credible, unbiased, and comprehensive news. Social Media and its ubiquitous buy-in have created conditions whereby misinformation and disinformation circulate endlessly and it becomes difficult to trace their origins or evaluate their intentions (Baym, 2022).

With regard to what gets paid attention to and circulated via social media, it is a simultaneous mix of naivete, intellectual vulnerability, communal affiliation, pleasure and belief. In other words, apart from being just exposed to mis-/disinformation, a cognitive bias predisposes people to actively search for and enjoy information that confirms their own beliefs, even if it's inaccurate. The complex psychosocial nature of the confidently misinformed person is harder to deal with than just fact-checking the information. Fact-checking can backfire and harden misconceptions. Focusing on factual accuracy does not adequately address the problem, as it ignores the identity-related and emotional factors that have a role in how people interact with information and only. (Baym, 2022)

Relying on social media applications to dissolve the mis/disinformation also presents its own set of challenges. An agreement of best practise for content moderation within or across social media sites has not been reached. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, have attempted to design algorithms for content moderation, flagging and removing misinformation, and promoting credible information, but these have been buggy and not very effective (Baym, 2022). An example of how social media has inadvertently had a primary role in distorting or facilitating political mischaracterisations - has been the polarisation toward what is 'woke'. Supporters of "woke" culture have always maintained that the term 'woke' had its origins in a state of being aware of social and political issues relating to systemic injustice and discrimination and the necessary dismantling of such systems for a more inclusive and equitable society. However, recently the term has been increasingly used pejoratively by right leaning critics who pitch it as an oppressive political correctness, a stifling of free debate and an insidious suppression of free speech. From the right – one should be able "to tell it like it is" and offense is part of the implications of free speech. This sentiment runs freely in the memes, shares, and hashtags on social media.

Proponents of 'wokeness' on social media on the left have tended to share the narrative that that criticism of "woke" culture is often rooted in a desire to maintain supremacist values, status quo and actively resist progress towards a more just society. On the left one should not be able to just say whatever you like with no accountability for the societal harm it inflicts.

Social media has played a significant role in the re-characterization of "woke" and anti-woke culture. As discussed earlier - on social media platforms, information and opinions can spread rapidly and widely, often without proper context or fact-checking. This enables certain narratives and perspectives to become exaggerated, amplified or oversimplified, leading to a false understanding of the issues at hand.

The nature of social media operational algorithms create filter-bubbled, self-feeding loops and echo chambers that reinforce certain perspectives and suppress others. What this affects is an incomplete and distorted view of the issues. All of this conceives a disruptive, polarized, and divisive online environment, one in which opposing viewpoints are often caricatured (think of the memes) or demonized rather than engaged with in a constructive manner. Social media engagement has been implicit in the mischaracterization of its aims and values of 'wokeness'. Some users on social media have assigned a more extreme interpretation of the culture and presented it as representative of the whole movement, others may have misunderstood or misinterpreted the goals of the movement resulting in mischaracterizations. Overall, while social media itself is not the entity as such solely responsible for the mischaracterization of "woke" culture, the engagement of persons in and through social media have played a noteworthy role in shaping the public discourse around these issues.

The relationship between social media, information disorder and the public – well - 'it's complicated'[2]. There is growing distrust of traditional mainstream media by the public. These kinds of sentiments gain traction and are exacerbated by information disorder proliferation across social media. Social media appears to be the media in which the distrusting public turn to when they lose their trust in mainstream media. There is no best-practise model how to effectively counteract bad information or precedent that would demonstrate how to deal with this type of information problem. There is resistance to any kind of control, what is perceived to be as censorship and gatekeeping of information.

There are some social media sites like Twitter under the leadership of Elon Musk who actively advocate for the complete removal of content moderation while toting the good of 'free speech' as its informer of good practise for a free and fair society and thus unchecked speech/information is promoted as a public good. It becomes difficult to decide on the ethic of what exactly is the public good. All things considered together the relational problem of social media, information disorder, and public engagement reveals itself to be an enigma or a difficult conundrum at the least.

Information, News, Media, and Rurality

There are various studies that make a connection between media, information, locality and social outcomes. Developments in information technology have changed the way the world operates. The advent of mobile smartphone technology and hi-speed internet infrastructure have had a significant influence on how information media is consumed and engaged with. Mobile devices are becoming an increasingly popular medium by which news and information is consumed. Alongside the ubiquitous mobile connectivity is the contemporary phenomenon of crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is the practice of obtaining ideas, content, services, or funding from open groups of people, typically through online platforms like social media rather than the traditional method of consultation of a few gatekeeping experts. Walker and Matsa's (2021) "*News Consumption Across Social Media*" report published findings that highlight the changing environment of news consumption. Here are the key takeaways from that report.

Seventy four percent of US adults utilize social media to get news. The most popular social media platform to get news from is Facebook at a usage rate of 54% of adults. The second most popular platform for news, is YouTube with 28% of adults using it. There is a smaller percentage, however significant share of users who get their news from Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Switch and recently TikTok. The use of social media for news varies according to notable demographics, younger, lower income and non-white and uses were more likely to turn to social media for news.

Americans believe that they are fairly capable of discerning between news and opinion content on social media in spite of concerns over misinformation and disinformation on social media. Many Americans say that they are aware of conspiracy theory and misinformation on social media but believe that they are not likely to embrace them.(Walker & Matsa, 2021). Whether this is true or not remains murky, as alluded to earlier dealing with the confidently

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[2] 'Its complicated' is an option offered for choice in Facebook to categorise a relationship status that is difficult to define or hard to explain but nevertheless in an existing relationship.

misinformed person is harder to navigate than dealing with someone who accepts a traditional standard of getting to truth.

Social media users consume news while passively scrolling through the news feed rather than actively seeking it out. When users do share news or trust news, it appears as if they are more likely to share it if it comes or is shared by people they know, rather than news shared by public figures or news organisations. (Walker & Matsa, 2021).   Social media users tend to consume news more passively than actively, with a majority of users saying they mainly see news when scrolling through their feeds rather than seeking it out. (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Passive consumption of misinformation from incorrectly perceived trustable sources may explain why misinformation might get consumed and repeated without much critical processing. From Becker Digital's (2023) white paper *Reaching rural communities through social media* we glean some insight into rural media habits, usage, and societal implication. The ownership of Smartphones in rural areas have increased in, leading to more social media usage. Traditional media outlets that previously serviced rural areas have decreased coverage, making social media a more readily available and practical substitute for news consumption goals in rural communities. Thus, usage rate of social media in rural communities is a significant variable in understanding aspects of rural sociology. Social media behaviour reflects how people interact and connect with each other in both rural and urban communities. The impact of social media on rural populations lies in the distinctive way it functions in rural community. Social media is used to support communication, information, and media needs of rural populations.

Rural residents tend to be more involved in online civic participation and discussion than urban or suburban-based users. Rural communities are active users of social media and use social media more functionally compared to urban and suburban populations. Rural residents rely on social media for essential needs like community news and information access. Social media is used for resource recommendations and social networking in rural communities. Social media presents rural residents with a powerful platform and/or tool to connect, stay informed of community endeavours and developments, connect with each other, and make a positive impact in their communities. Whilst understanding rural online, social media engagement through social media may present itself as be an opening for public-facing organisation to capitalise upon. (Becker, 2023).

Nah et al. (2021) investigate the interaction between diverse communities and community storytelling networks in terms of civic participation, through the use of social media and interpersonal discussions. As proposed in the study *Community Storytelling Networks and Civic Participation in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities: Communication Infrastructure Theory Approach*, Community Story telling networks in rural communities are constituted of social media engagement and interpersonal discussion within social media. The authors discuss how rural community users engage with community-oriented social media, the interpersonal interaction within social media with others in their community and how it affects participation in civic activities. What their findings revealed was that community-oriented social media (CSM) ostensibly supported civic participation, and the relationship between CSM and civic participation was stronger for residents of rural communities than for residents in urban communities. One particular insight gained from the study points to how community storytelling networks can be leveraged to promote civic participation. (Nah et al., 2021). While this may be significant in terms of the construction of strong communities and ensuring effective governance, from this research's point of view – the opportunity to leverage community storytelling networks, also exposes a vulnerability rural communities may have to manipulation, if leveraged towards an agenda.

Social capital is a significant concept within the field of sociology that speaks to the manner in which social relationships and networks of relationships, among people in particular societies, operate and function effectively. Social Capital may include the benefits, support, collective action, trust, and resources that come out of those social networks. Social Capital can influence individual and collective behaviour as well as shape outcomes such as literacy, education, and economic well-being. In *"Social Capital in rural and urban communities: Testing differences in media effects and models"* Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) investigate whether there is a difference between rural and urban communities in the United States in terms of the effect of mass media on social capital.

What this study indicated was that the effect of mass media on social capital differed by the type of mass media and the community type. For instance – Newspaper consumption had positive effects in both rural and urban communities while entertainment TV viewing had negative effects. In urban areas Local TV news use had positive effects but in rural communities only network TV news use has positive effects for pro-social behaviour. The study also found that in a rural community there is a reciprocity between social networks and social trust. However, in the urban community there is a one-way movement from social networks to social trust. The findings suggest that social capital may be

influenced by media and this has implications for the role of the media in developing individual and community outcomes. (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004).

The article "*Accelerating Rural Connectivity Research: How Facebook Helps Bring Connectivity to Hard-to-Reach Areas*" describes Facebook's efforts to help bring internet connectivity to rural and remote areas around the world. The authors describe Facebook's intention to bring internet connectivity to everyone, regardless of where they live with a special focus on rurality. As they argue – rural areas lack resources and infrastructure needed to support internet connectivity. So, Facebook has developed a suite of high-tech tools and technologies to bring connectivity to hard-to-reach areas. Facebook is continually working toward developing and deploying these technologies in order to find new and innovative ways to bring connectivity to rural and remote areas. (Kusuma, Lidell, Boch, 2012). The takeaway here is that Facebook is committed to making it easier for the Facebook platform and content to be readily available to rural communities.

Menczer & Hills look at the relationship between social media, fake news, and information overload in the article "*The Attention Economy*". (Menczer & Hills, 2020). The authors examine how misinformation and fake news spreads so efficiently on social media during times of crisis and uncertainty and reckon that information overload contributes or at least has a role in enabling this dynamic. When people are presented with a large amount of information – they are likely cognitively primed to take shortcuts and heuristics to make decisions. This allows for misinformation take quick and strong root.

The nature of social media platforms whose primary goal is to engage users to offer the marketing potential of its large user-base to advertisers, is not overly concerned with the psychosocial effect of content that is detrimental, trustworthy, or accurate. The authors also draw attention to the vulnerability of people to confirmation bias where people tend to seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs and this cognitive feature exacerbates the problem. This creates an environment where misinformation and disinformation proliferate on a scale that is unprecedented. It is difficult because of the nature of Social Media dynamics, to hold any one particular entity to accountability (Menczer & Hills, 2020). The Netflix documentary film "*The Social Dilemma*" (Orlowski, 2020) explores this phenomenon with the leading designers of social media apps in big tech Industry. It draws attention to the difficulty of both defining the problem outlined above and how to resolve the problems. The documentary illustrates the complexity of the problem of social media. For example, while the Facebook platform does indeed do a great job of providing free digital space to share and connect and that has been a positive effect for society, it also introduced new problems. Facebook presents as merely a digital social networking site, and we take it at that face-value. However, Facebook is also a business with a business model to generate profit, that is its core business. Its algorithms are programmed to just be concerned with what facilitates in-app activity that might boost Facebook's potential for revenue. The algorithms are not beholden to a moral code or ethic. Thus, Facebook is not entirely concerned about not publishing and connecting users through harmful or manipulative material. Facebook's algorithms are concerned with engaging as many users as it can and then connecting in-platform participation amongst those users as much as it can. It is not concerned with the ethics and veracity of what it is that the users are connecting and engaging about. It is not concerned with whether the content-bait takes advantage of and/or manipulates certain human traits and cognitive biases. It is also not concerned with how groups use social media. Facebook does not create the content, Facebook's users create the content. Thus, Facebook cannot technically be held accountable for unethical conduct. It is a business that provides a platform in which user-generated content can be shared freely.

The Relationship between Social Media Use and Misinformation

There have been a few studies that have actively examined the link between social media use and forms of misinformation. Both Propaganda and information disorder operate through the manipulation or production of information with the intent to deceive to influence people's beliefs and behaviours. It goes without much explanation that propaganda and information disorder can have negative effects on society. Propaganda as a strategy promotes conspiracy theory and divisive political rhetoric. Propaganda is largely driven through the engines of mass media. It relies on disseminating its agenda to the greatest amount of people that it can reach as quickly as possible without having to face much critical review.

The Propaganda Model of Media set forth in the book "*Manufacturing Consent*" suggests that, contrary to idealised belief, the media is not neutral or objective but rather an apparatus that is wielded to serve the interests of those in power. They outline the ways in which media is influenced and utilized to ideologically manipulate public opinion and encourage certain agendas. The model suggests that elite groups use their power and influence to produce content of media that punts their preferred narratives and capitalises on the returns. (Herman & Chomsky,1988).

Foley (2021) revisits the Propaganda Model of media and updates its insight, analyses, and applications within the contemporary digital media landscape. The work builds on the "*Manufacturing Consent*" argument and expands it to include the role of digital media in shaping public opinion. Here are some of the most important points Foley makes about propaganda and digital media: The relevant insights that Foley provides speak to the changing nature of propaganda within the digital landscape. Digital media has opened a two-way communication channel which now allows individuals to consume, generate, produce, and disseminate on a scale that is phenomenally greater than the traditional sources of media production.   The rise of social media and its operational model in which it programmes its algorithms to filter content to specifically cater to users' preferences and online behaviour, has allowed for propaganda to become more custom-made to appeal to peoples' cognitive vulnerabilities. Propaganda in effect has become personalized and its hooking power is more dexterous.   It becomes much more difficult to identify and trace the originator or sources of propaganda messages on social digital media than traditional forms of media manipulation. The propaganda message is conveyed, re-hashed, looped and repackaged and repeatedly endlessly through posts, memes, and viral videos. Thus, the sources of the propaganda messages become obscured in the thick fog of shared content. Added to this, the effect of such propaganda messages is amplified through filter bubbles and echo chambers as social media algorithms reinforce confirmation biases, by tailoring content delivery that continually exposes you to only that kind of message. (Foley, 2021).

Propaganda, conspiracy theory and mis/dis-information enjoy both a mutualistic and generative relationship with each other. Conspiracy theory as defined by Collins Dictionary refers to "*any theory that purports to explain something by ascribing it to collusion among powerful conspirators*."[3] (HarperCollins, 2023). Conspiracy Theory functions as a fantastic tool for social and political manipulation. Many political agendas are steered through the presentations of conspiracy theory. Elements of societal consciousness and discourse have been heavily influenced by conspiracy theory. An example of this would be how virulent Q-Anon generated conspiracy theory influenced public and political action. The political action for example the January 6th riots on the US Capital, which was engineered through disinformation contained within Q-Anon conspiracy theory propagation had serious, if not harmful consequences to those who participated in the political action and to those who were inadvertently involved by having to deal with it.

Conspiracy Theory and Post-truth

The relationship between post-truth and conspiracy theories is indicated in the similarity of their tendency to manipulate information in a way that undermines truth. Conspiracy theories often implore a rejection of mainstream narratives and exhibit a distrust of official/traditional sources of information. Much the same –the psychosocial mechanism by which rejection of verifiable truths conducted through mainstream narratives may take place while offering the ideological reconciliation of "going with your heart", fits well in a post-truth paradigm.

Gkinopoulos (et.al) investigated whether passive social media use predicts beliefs in conspiracy theories through the mediating role of personal relative deprivation, they found that this is indeed the case.   By "Passive social media use" they refer to the act of merely scrolling through social media without actively engaging or posting content. While they define "Personal relative deprivation" as the feeling that one's outcomes are worse than what they deserve or what others have. The results showed that passive social media use positively correlated to predicted beliefs in conspiracy theories. Passive social media use was linked to increased personal relative deprivation and that in turn seemed to correlate with stronger beliefs in conspiracy theory. The study also found that the more politically conservative a participant was, the stronger the effect of passive social media use on their belief in conspiracy was. The findings of the study suggest that through passive social media use, personal relative deprivation increases and that this likely contributes to the spread of conspiracy theories. (Gkinopoulos et al., 2022).

The social media app Facebook itself has been implicated in providing the space and tools for conspiracy theory to thrive. They have been accused of being indirectly implicated in the organisation and facilitation of extremism. The Guardian reports that Facebook's own internal reports as early as 2018 indicated research results that showed Facebook's algorithms are designed to exploit the human brain's preference for divisiveness. The report indicated that 64% of its users who joined extremist groups did so because the platform's algorithms coaxed them there. (Paul, 2021).

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[3] https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/conspiracy-theory

The study *"The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation"* investigates the to the usage of social media and its connection with the tendency to hold onto conspiracy theories. false information and its connection. The analyses suggest that participants who consult social media as their primary source of news tended to hold more conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, it showed that the more frequently they use social media for news or other purposes, the more people tend to hold more conspiracies (Enders. et al, 2021) Frequent usage of social media as a primary means for information consumption needs may explain why many users hold misinformed conspiratorial type beliefs.

Conclusion

Against the framework explored above this paper offers that there is an intricate relationship that exists between rurality, media consumption habits, trust in media sources, and usage of types of media. Since, overall rural residents consumed less news than their urban counterparts they are less likely to get a complete or balanced view of the news. They are also at risk of getting an incomplete account of news media in general. Owing to their low exposure of news as well as narrowed perspectives of news, their media-literacy might function at a compromised level as well. As such they are less likely to exercise sound media-literate discernment over good information and mis/disinformation. Rural residents tend to rely on local news sources rather than national or international sources. Local news sources are mediated through social media channels. Rural communities are active users of social media and use social media for essential needs like community news, resource recommendations, social networking, and information access. Local news sources may be more likely to lack resources, media literacy and expertise to adequately fact-check information.

The issue therein is that there is the potential for a heightened susceptibility to mis/dis-information that finds the highest proliferation rates within social media channels. Mis/dis-information is often packaged through conspiracy theory. Rampant conspiracy theory is prevalent within social media channels, to which rural residents rely on as a source of local news. There exists a relational dimension between social media use and the retention of conspiracy theory beliefs. Rural residents because of the nature of their engagement with social media are at higher risk of exposure to conspiracy theory. Conspiratorial thinking seamlessly aligns with information disorder. Information disorder is a feature of a post-truth paradigm. Implicit within information disorder is the element of propaganda. Propaganda and the ease of its dissemination via unregulated mass media systems can be manipulated by political actors to manufacture and proliferate ideology to support its aims. In many countries, rural communities have expressed frustration and resentment at their social conditions where they feel marginalised and despair at their economic and socio-political outlook. These frustrations can be channelled into support for a populist agenda via propaganda that promise to address these issues. Populist politicians typically pitch themselves as the political actors who are 'one with the everyday people' and more in favour of the common man than representing the order and interests of established urban and political elite. They might exploit this appeal to rural voters with specific rhetoric that promises to defend home-grown traditional values, defend the pride in national identity, family, and religion. They may also promise to advocate for issues that are perceived as beneficial to rural areas, such as social recognition, investment in agriculture, support for small businesses, and protectionist trade policies. As such Populist actors may be able to capitalise on the nature of the post-truth paradigm by enjoying the uncritical acceptance of propaganda through mass media systems.

Paying particular attention to the large scale buy-in to social media systems and the functional role that it plays in conducting post-truth, the shift toward a post-truth paradigm where society naively adopts post-truth conditions and affect, places society at an amplified risk of manipulation and exploitation. We have already seen evidence of this type of manipulation in public discourse, political, social and on economic or marketing fronts. Rural residents are ostensibly at a particular vulnerability in this regard as their nature of their engagement and usage of social media comports itself to this type of manipulative exploitation. This study supports the notion that rural communities are more vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation and exploitation through a post-truth paradigm.

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