Bullshit Asymmetry Principle

Idea In Short

The Bullshit Asymmetry Principle suggests that creating misinformation is easier and quicker than debunking it, highlighting the challenges of addressing and countering the spread of falsehoods in society.

George Bernard Shaw once warned:

> Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance

His words ring truer now than ever before, as we face a seemingly endless stream of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and unsubstantiated rumors. To combat this growing issue, a new concept has emerged - the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle.

In an era rife with misinformation, George Bernard Shaw's cautionary words ring truer than ever. The proliferation of false knowledge, or bullshit, poses significant challenges to our society. To shed light on this issue, we turn to the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle, also known as Brandolini's Law.

This principle posits that debunking false information requires exponentially more effort than creating it. In other words, the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it. It's a sobering thought, but it's one that we must keep in mind if we hope to navigate the complex landscape of information that surrounds us.

Bullshit Asymmetry Principle

According to this concept, bullshit refers to the spreading of misinformation (incorrect information) and disinformation (intentional lies). Unfortunately, the spreading of both is

nothing new. As far back as the 1700s, Satirist Jonathan Swift wrote:

> Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it

However, in our age of social media, the spreading of such misinformation and lies has been taken to a whole new level.

The Bullshit Asymmetry Principle was actually coined on Twitter by programmer Alberto Brandolini after he was inspired by Daniel Kahneman's book, Thinking, Fast and Slow. Brandolini reflected on the politics of the day and saw that it took far more energy to refute false claims than it did to make them in the first place.

Causes

There are several factors that contribute to the widespread propagation of misinformation and disinformation.

Confirmation Heuristic

One such factor is the ease of spreading false and/or unsubstantiated ideas that align with underlying fears or beliefs. This is often achieved through the Confirmation Heuristic, which refers to our tendency to seek out information that confirms what we already believe to be true. Silo-based communities on social media also play a role, as they amplify misinformation and provide deeper acceptance that comes from a peer group leveraging Social Proof.

Burden Of Proof

Another factor is the burden of proof. This is when the person making the claim shifts the burden of proof away from themselves and towards those who wish to refute the point. By simply suggesting that something is "possible," they can effectively move the goalposts and make it more difficult for others to prove them wrong. Additionally, people often move fast to fill the space to explain an event or crisis, without worrying about evidence or data. They effectively define the framing of the conversation and leverage the Anchoring Heuristic.

Mere Exposure Effect

The Mere Exposure Effect is yet another factor that contributes to the spread of misinformation. This effect suggests that repeating something, even a lie, helps to embed it into our understanding and belief system. Finally, there is the inherent drive by many to spread misleading or unsubstantiated information. This is particularly evident in politics, where there is a desire to rapidly "define the narrative of the day." It also exists in scientific circles, where academics and researchers are often under pressure to publish or perish and focus on delivering outputs rather than ensuring that their findings are solid and able to be replicated.

Tackling Mis-information

Misinformation and disinformation have long been present, but the digital age and social media have propelled their dissemination to unprecedented levels. Understanding the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle can empower individuals to effectively counter lies and misinformation. Here are several strategies:

Apply The Scientific Method

Adopt a rigorous approach to information evaluation by formulating hypotheses, actively testing them, and striving to falsify them. This method fosters critical thinking and evidence-based decision-making.

Remain Skeptical

Employ tools like the CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) test to critically assess information sources. Insist on reputable evidence and multiple sources to substantiate claims.

Weigh Impact vs. Effort

Evaluate the impact of misinformation on specific target audiences and consider the appropriate level of effort required to refute it. Prioritize resources where the impact is most significant.

Identify Debunking Shortcuts

Instead of engaging in exhaustive research, seek credible counter voices or highlight the source of misinformation and their potential agenda. This approach saves time and resources while still challenging falsehoods.

Focus On The Audience

Instead of attempting to convince the originator of misinformation, concentrate on persuading the broader audience. Craft counterarguments with the specific audience in mind, appealing to their values, beliefs, and knowledge.

Push The Burden Of Proof Back

Invert the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle by demanding proof from the source of misinformation. Challenge them to provide evidence for their claims and highlight the need for extraordinary evidence for extraordinary claims.

Utilize Occam's Razor

Encourage individuals to consider explanations with the fewest assumptions. Simplify the complex web of causal factors and promote more straightforward interpretations.

Embrace Hitchen's Razor

Apply the principle that claims made without evidence can be dismissed without evidence. Refute misinformation with a commensurate level of effort and substantiated evidence.

Deploy Permission Structures

When attempting to shift someone's belief in misinformation, employ permission structures that facilitate a transition without making them feel wrong. Create an environment that encourages critical thinking and openness to alternative perspectives.

Summary

The Bullshit Asymmetry Principle presents a formidable challenge in combating

misinformation, but it is not insurmountable. By understanding the power of fake information, recognizing the drivers behind its spread, and employing effective strategies, we can navigate the quagmire of misinformation. Applying critical thinking, skepticism, and evidence-based approaches, we can work towards a more informed and resilient society. As we confront the dangers of false knowledge, let us remember that it is our collective responsibility to separate fact from fiction and build a foundation of truth upon which we can progress.