

## Impact of social media disinformation explored in ‘The Social Dilemma’

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### Abstract

*This study explored the significant impact of disinformation spread through social media, focusing on the documentary “The Social Dilemma” by Jeff Orlowski. The film provided a critical lens to examine how social media algorithms amplified false narratives. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the research highlighted key themes related to disinformation, such as political polarization in the U.S., the flat earth theory, the #Pizzagate conspiracy, Covid-19 misinformation, and the incitement of hate speech in Myanmar. The findings revealed that algorithms designed to maximize user engagement often prioritized sensational and misleading content, exacerbating the spread of false information. This fueled social tensions and undermined public health and democratic processes. The study emphasized the urgent need for increased public awareness of disinformation’s effects and called on social media platforms to take responsibility for reducing its spread.*

## Introduction

In the modern era of technology, where digital platforms have taken over the distribution of information, the influence of disinformation on public opinion has become a crucial concern, as exemplified by the film “The Social Dilemma.” By combining dramatized storytelling with expert interviews, the film sheds light on the consequences of unchecked digital manipulation, including political polarization, conspiracy theories, public health misinformation, and ethnic violence.

Disinformation, an expression that has garnered much focus in recent times, pertains to the purposeful dissemination of untrue, incorrect, or deceptive information with the aim of inflicting harm, deceiving, or misleading individuals or collectives (George, 2024). According to Lindgren (2017), disinformation can be disseminated across several digital media channels with the intention of manipulating individuals’ prejudices, emotions, and anxieties. The deliberate nature of this feature is vital in differentiating disinformation from misinformation, which refers to erroneous information that is distributed without the

explicit intention to deceive (Rapti et al., 2022). Misinformation can stem from unintentional errors or a lack of knowledge, but disinformation is distinguished by a deliberate attempt to distort views, typically for political, economic, or ideological motives (Watt, 2023). Disinformation, by its intentional nature, is distinguished from unintentional distribution of erroneous information, which is usually referred to as misinformation (Martens et al., 2018).

In the context of disinformation and misleading news, the distribution of such content is frequently motivated by particular intentions, such as advancing partial perspectives, misleading individuals, or inflicting harm (Hillebrandt, 2021). Disinformation, which refers to the intentional production and dissemination of incorrect or altered information, is often driven by personal, political, or commercial motives (Lee, 2020). Furthermore, disinformation is intentionally employed to strategically manipulate public opinion, shape narratives, and even prioritize specific issues in terms of security (Rapti et al., 2022). Disinformation can be strategically utilized in situations such as political campaigns or crises to deliberately generate division, promote polarization, and alter people's views for strategic advantages (Freiling et al., 2023). The intentional dissemination of inaccurate information in the form of news articles or documentaries, with the aim of promoting particular political objectives, illustrates the strategic character of misinformation campaigns (Nakayama et al., 2023). The deliberate spreading of incorrect information, which is frequently done through different media platforms, highlights the necessity for strong steps to counteract the detrimental impact of disinformation (Samchynska, 2022).

The widespread dissemination of misleading information not only alters how individuals see reality, but also creates divisions within societies, erodes confidence in trustworthy institutions, and presents substantial obstacles to democratic processes and well-informed decision-making. Gaining insight into the intricacies of a disinformation society is crucial in order to devise successful tactics to mitigate these detrimental effects and promote a well-informed and unified public conversation. A disinformation society is characterized by an abundance of information that is challenging to navigate, leading to an overwhelming amount of information that impacts individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Disinformation is not merely an incidental consequence of the information society, but rather an intrinsic characteristic that necessitates comprehension in order to effectively tackle and control the problems and difficulties arising from disinformation (Marshall, et al., 2015). The proliferation of disinformation has become a notable obstacle in modern society, as numerous studies have emphasized its harmful impact on trust, democracy, and public health. The main objective of individuals disseminating disinformation is to deliberately create disorder, undermine confidence in established organizations, and provoke animosity and suspicion towards the government (Kollár, 2022). This phenomenon extends beyond the internet and news media and is widespread in the larger information society (Marshall, 2017).

The problem of disinformation in the realm of social media has attracted considerable scrutiny because of its extensive impact on society. Disinformation operations conducted via social media entail organized endeavors employing bots and remunerated people to disseminate false narratives, resulting in unwitting persons inadvertently distributing misinformation (French, 2023). Social media platforms have emerged as fertile environments for the swift propagation of disinformation, posing a challenge for communities to discern between verifiable information and intentional falsehoods (Qerimi & Gërguri, 2022). Disinformation has far-reaching detrimental effects that go beyond political goals and impact multiple facets of society, such as public health, climate change initiatives, and general societal welfare (Fu et al., 2022). The intricacy of disinformation on social media

extends beyond mere fabrication and conspiracy theories, embracing partial news, political manipulation, and misinterpreted facts (Mogali, 2023).

"The Social Dilemma," a 2020 documentary-drama filmed by Jeff Orlowski, delves into the tremendous influence of social networking on human behavior and society. The documentary showcases interviews with former workers of prominent technology corporations such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. These individuals disclose how these platforms are deliberately designed to manipulate users' psychological tendencies in order to generate financial gains. The core of its storyline revolves around a fabricated tale that highlights the tangible repercussions of an overindulgence in social media on a family. The text highlights the prevalent themes of manipulation and addiction, demonstrating how algorithms customize material to optimize user engagement, resulting in addictive behaviors. Furthermore, the film explores the widespread problem of disinformation, illustrating how these algorithms magnify sensational and incorrect content, so exacerbating societal differences and spreading misinformation. It also tackles the harmful impacts of social media on mental well-being, specifically among the youth, by emphasizing problems such as increased anxiety and sadness due to the incessant need for online approval. The investigation of disinformation in "The Social Dilemma" is a crucial and captivating issue that elucidates the role of social media platforms in propagating misleading information. The film demonstrates how algorithms that aim to optimize user interaction frequently value sensational and deceptive information over factual precision. The prioritizing is influenced by the platforms' business structures, which depend on user attention and engagement to earn income from advertising. Consequently, posts that elicit intense emotional responses or validate pre-existing prejudices tend to garner greater prominence, thus reinforcing echo chambers and filter bubbles.

Additionally, "The Social Dilemma" investigates the methods by which deception rapidly spreads across social networks. This illustrates how the dissemination of false or misleading information, whether done purposefully or inadvertently, may rapidly gain popularity and shape the views of the general population. The video showcases cases in which misleading or exaggerated narratives have been extensively circulated, resulting in a broad acceptance of falsehoods and eroding faith in credible sources of information. "The Social Dilemma" urges viewers to analyze their media consumption habits and reflect on the wider consequences of living in a digitally networked world, where discerning between truth and deception is becoming increasingly challenging. This is achieved through interviews with tech insiders and experts. To address the negative impact of disinformation and protect the integrity of public discussions in the digital era, it is necessary to prioritize transparency, accountability, and digital literacy.

Given the extensive range of applications and the significant impact of social media in disseminating false information to influence society, the researcher is keen on closely examining this phenomenon. This study uses a film as it is a visual medium that may offer a comprehensive depiction in a brief duration. The film "The Social Dilemma" is selected because it effectively elucidates the deep influence of disinformation on social media on society, aligning with the research objectives in a thorough and comprehensive manner.



Figure 1.  
"The Social Dilemma" Poster Film

Since there is an increasing amount of research on how social media contributes to the spread of disinformation, little is known about the precise mechanisms by which algorithms magnify misleading narratives and shape public opinion in real-time situations. Previous research frequently ignores the relationship between algorithmic spectacular content ranking and the ensuing impacts on social trust and political polarization. Given this context, the study seeks to answer the following research question: "How does the documentary *The Social Dilemma* portray disinformation on social media, and what insights does it offer about its impact on society, particularly in the realms of politics, public health, and social conflict?" By addressing this question, the analysis aims to uncover how the film constructs its narrative around disinformation and how these representations contribute to the viewer's understanding of the risks posed by algorithm-driven digital platforms.

## Method

This study used a qualitative content analysis approach to offer data in the form of words and themes, enabling the researcher to derive meaningful interpretations from the findings. Content analysis is a systematic research approach that involves examining and understanding the content of different types of communication, including text, images, sounds, and symbols. Its purpose is to extract significant insights and uncover patterns or trends (Horani, 2023). Researchers can utilize this method to systematically classify and encode written material, thereby revealing hidden patterns, ideas, or connections within the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The object of study is "*The Social Dilemma*," a film directed by Jeff Orlowski and released in 2020. The film has a runtime of around 1 hour and 34 minutes. The documentary has received high praise and acknowledgement within the category of documentaries. Specific scenes, narrative segments, dramatizations, and expert interviews within the film were selected based on their relevance to disinformation-related topics. These include segments addressing political polarization, conspiracy theories (e.g., flat earth, #Pizzagate),



COVID-19 disinformation, hate speech in Myanmar, and the manipulation of democratic processes. Time-stamped segments were identified and reviewed in multiple cycles to ensure accurate data representation.

A coding framework was developed to identify key themes within the film. These themes were then grouped into main categories such as:

- Algorithms and Political Polarization
- Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation
- Public Health and COVID-19 Misinformation
- Ethnic Hate and Digital Violence

The analysis in content analysis might vary depending on the specific requirements and subject of research, with a wide array of tools and methodologies accessible for examining textual data (Marilyn et al., 2006). The study conducted an analysis using three stages: summary or abstraction, explication, and structuring (Mayring, 2014).

Elo & Kyngäs (2008) state that abstraction in content analysis entails creating categories that effectively capture the fundamental aspects of the material under examination, thereby providing a comprehensive description of the research issue. This technique involves generating abstract concepts or themes that encapsulate the fundamental significance or recurring patterns identified in the data. Researchers can simplify complex material and extract critical insights by categorizing or thematizing the data, hence aiding in data interpretation (Hanzel, 2021).

Explication refers to the process of systematically and thoroughly analyzing a concept or phrase in order to clarify and refine its meaning (Novaes & Reck, 2015). The objective is to offer a more accurate and logical explanation of a topic by substituting the current comprehension with a more organized and definitive explication (Griffiths et al., 2014). The utilization of conceptual re-engineering for theoretical purposes improves the precision and clarity of the concept under analysis (Brun, 2015).

Structuring is a systematic organization and arrangement of data in order to enable analysis and interpretation (Brown et al., 2018). The method involves classifying information, recognizing patterns, and developing connections within the data to extract significant insights (Duriau et al., 2007). Researchers can efficiently handle and examine extensive amounts of textual data to discover patterns and themes by organizing the content (Moretti et al., 2011).

Although this research involves the analysis of a publicly available documentary (The Social Dilemma), ethical considerations ethical issues are still crucial for ensuring that scholarly research is conducted responsibly and with respect. Since the study employs qualitative content analysis to interpret media representations, the researcher must steer clear of bias and distortion while analyzing the film's plot and interviews.

In line with ethical research practices, the analysis acknowledges the intent of the filmmakers and avoids manipulating scenes or statements out of context to support predetermined arguments. Flick (2018) emphasizes, "Qualitative research is based on a philosophy of respecting the perspectives and contexts of those studied". Therefore, this study seeks to preserve the integrity of the documentary's message and the authenticity of the participants' voices.

## Results And Discussion

### Abstraction

In this context, abstraction seeks to streamline and emphasize the primary themes surrounding disinformation, which include various specific issues depicted in the film. These issues encompass the polarization of political parties in the United States, the flat earth theory, #pizzagate, Covid-19 disinformation, and hate speech in Myanmar. By prioritizing these crucial aspects, the process of abstraction will condense intricate and multidimensional narratives into their fundamental elements, yielding a lucid comprehension of the dissemination of disinformation and its enormous societal impacts. This entails discerning the primary arguments and recurrent patterns present in the film, elucidating the methods by which disinformation spreads, and exploring the diverse ways it impacts public perception, behavior, and societal structures.

The topic of disinformation is briefly introduced at the beginning of the documentary (00:05:04-00:05:43), where it is framed as a significant and emerging issue in the realm of social media and digital communication. This initial introduction sets the stage for a more comprehensive examination later in the film. The documentary delves deeply into the subject in the middle portion (00:51:20-01:15:56), thoroughly exploring the mechanisms by which disinformation spreads, the role of social media algorithms in amplifying false information, and the wide-ranging consequences on public perception, political polarization, and societal trust. Through expert interviews, real-world examples, and dramatized scenarios, this section provides an in-depth analysis of the strategies used to disseminate disinformation and the resulting impact on individual behavior and democratic processes.

The documentary's segment from 57:52 to 58:56 focuses on the role of social media algorithms in amplifying extreme political beliefs, worsening political divisions, and impacting the democratic process by spreading false information. Social media platforms, propelled by algorithms that promote more user interaction, frequently magnify sensational or emotionally charged false material. This results in the extensive propagation of inaccurate or deceptive material that corresponds to and strengthens users' current convictions, while dissenting perspectives are selectively excluded. As a result, individuals become more firmly rooted in their political stances, leading to a polarized atmosphere where finding common ground and engaging in meaningful conversation becomes progressively challenging. Dissemination of disinformation not only exacerbates societal rifts but also affects the political process by fostering echo chambers that distort public perception and voting patterns. This phenomenon erodes the fundamental principles of a well-rounded and knowledgeable democratic society, as voters make their choices based on skewed or inaccurate information.



Figure 2.

Algorithms on Social Media Produce Disinformation That Creates Political Polarization in the US

Minutes 58:57-01:00:02 of this film illustrates how conspiracy theories, such as the flat earth theory, can spread widely and gain followers through algorithms that prioritize sensational content. Social media networks employ advanced algorithms to prioritize material that elicits intense emotional responses, be it positive or negative, in order to optimize user interaction. Provocative and contentious subjects, such as the flat earth theory, have a heightened ability to attract attention and are hence more prone to being endorsed and disseminated. As users engage with flat earth information, the algorithms observe and subsequently promote like content to these people, establishing a feedback loop that consistently strengthens their exposure to the conspiracy idea. This technique has the ability to progressively attract users who may initially have doubts or lack knowledge about the theory, persuading them to become believers through repeated exposure to convincing and seemingly trustworthy information. The flat earth community is expanding as more individuals actively participate in and disseminate this content, creating echo chambers where members strengthen each other's convictions and exclude opposing viewpoints. These echo chambers are enabled by algorithms that curate content to align with users' preexisting tastes, resulting in a uniform information environment that lacks essential opposing viewpoints. Moreover, influential advocates of the flat earth idea can utilize these venues to enhance their influence, capitalizing on the contagious nature of sensational content to draw substantial audiences. The extensive propagation of such false information not only deceives individuals but also undermines established scientific knowledge and cultivates distrust in authorized scientific authority.



Figure 3.

US Basketball Player Apologizes for Spreading the Flat Earth Conspiracy Theory After He Saw Recommendations on Youtube

The time frame from 01:00:54 to 01:03:11 in this documentary explains the real-world impact of disinformation, highlighting the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which led to a violent incident, and illustrating how baseless conspiracy theories can be accepted as truth by segments of society. The #Pizzagate theory falsely claimed that a child trafficking ring involving prominent politicians was operating out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria. Despite being debunked, the theory spread widely on social media, fueled by sensational and emotionally charged content that algorithms prioritized for engagement. The rapid and extensive dissemination of this false narrative convinced many individuals of its validity. This culminated in a violent incident where a man, believing the conspiracy, entered the pizzeria with a firearm, intending to investigate and free the alleged victims. This incident underscores the dangerous real-world consequences of disinformation. The #Pizzagate case exemplifies how social media platforms can amplify baseless theories, turning them into widely accepted “truths” for some people. This process reveals the power of algorithms to spread disinformation rapidly and the susceptibility of individuals to believe and act on such false information. It highlights the critical need for greater awareness and measures to counteract the spread of harmful disinformation in the digital age.





Figure 4.  
The Pizzagate Conspiracy Theory Spread on Facebook

Time interval 01:03:34-01:05:14 in the film demonstrates the impact of disinformation regarding the Covid-19 outbreak on both public health and individual behavior. During the epidemic, misconceptions about the virus's source, how it spreads, ways to prevent it, and methods of treatment quickly propagated on social media channels. Algorithms engineered to optimize user interaction frequently gave preference to sensational and deceptive information, resulting in widespread perplexity and distrust. The dissemination of false information on Covid-19 resulted in a range of detrimental behaviors and attitudes. For instance, the dissemination of inaccurate assertions on the efficacy or risks of vaccines has resulted in vaccine hesitancy, leading to a decline in vaccination rates and impeding the attainment of herd immunity. Likewise, the dissemination of false information regarding alleged remedies or preventive measures, such as the consumption of certain substances or the avoidance of specific behaviors, endangers individuals and distracts from established health guidelines that have been scientifically validated. The spread of disinformation also played a role in fostering public opposition to health protocols such as wearing masks and practicing social distance, so intensifying the transmission of the infection. The pushback was frequently driven by conspiracy theories that depicted public health recommendations as a component of a broader, malicious goal. In general, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the substantial influence of deception on public health. This incident demonstrated the rapid dissemination of incorrect information, its impact on individual actions, and its detrimental effect on public health efforts. It underscores the immediate necessity for effective tactics to counter disinformation and promote precise, trustworthy information in times of health emergencies.



Figure 5.  
Disinformation about the COVID-19 Virus Has Resulted Chaos in Society

The duration of the frame from 01:07:02 to 01:08:24 in this documentary highlights the role of social media in spreading hate speech and inciting violence against specific ethnic groups, focusing on the situation in Myanmar. In Myanmar, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have been used to disseminate disinformation and inflammatory content targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority. Algorithms that prioritize engaging



content have inadvertently amplified posts containing hate speech and false information about the Rohingya. These posts often depicted the Rohingya as a threat to the nation, fueling ethnic tensions and justifying discriminatory actions and violence against them. The widespread distribution of such disinformation contributed to a climate of hatred and intolerance, leading to real-world consequences, including acts of violence, displacement, and severe human rights abuses against the Rohingya. The virality of this content on social media platforms played a significant role in mobilizing and justifying these acts among the broader population. This case underscores the dangerous potential of social media to propagate hate speech and disinformation, demonstrating how these platforms can exacerbate ethnic conflicts and contribute to large-scale human rights violations. It emphasizes the urgent need for better regulation and oversight of content on social media to prevent the spread of harmful disinformation and protect vulnerable communities.



Figure 6.  
Disinformation spread via Facebook Sparked Violence Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar

## Explication

### 1. Political Polarization in the US

Scenes from the documentary demonstrate how algorithms reinforce political polarization by presenting content that supports extreme political views and how this affects elections. In the film “The Social Dilemma,” several scenes illustrate the mechanics of these algorithms. One notable scene shows how social media platforms use sophisticated algorithms to track user behavior, preferences, and interactions. These algorithms then curate personalized content feeds that prioritize posts, articles, and videos aligned with users’ existing political beliefs. For example, if a user frequently engages with content from a particular political perspective, the algorithm will predominantly show similar content, often of an increasingly extreme nature. Another scene features interviews with former tech insiders who explain the concept of “engagement-based ranking.” They reveal that content generating strong emotional reactions—whether outrage, fear, or enthusiasm—tends to receive higher engagement. Consequently, extreme political content, which often elicits such reactions, is more likely to be promoted and shared. The documentary also highlights the impact of this algorithmic reinforcement on elections. It shows how targeted disinformation campaigns, leveraging these algorithms, can sway voters by inundating them with tailored, persuasive content that either supports their biases or spreads false information about political opponents. This manipulation of information flows can skew public perception, influence voting behavior, and ultimately affect election outcomes. Through these scenes, the documentary effectively illustrates the role of social media algorithms in deepening political divides and their potential to undermine the democratic process by shaping the information landscape in ways that favor extremism and disinformation.

## **2. Flat Earth Belief**

Segments of the program illustrate the widespread adoption and acceptance of the flat earth belief. The documentary “The Social Dilemma” provides detailed insights into the dynamics that drive the widespread popularity of conspiracy content. One portion showcases conversations with technology experts who analyze how social media algorithms promote sensational and contentious content in order to optimize user engagement. These algorithms detect content that produce significant levels of engagement, such as likes, shares, comments, and views, and then amplify their reach to a broader audience. Consequently, anything that is sensational or controversial, such as videos promoting the flat earth theory, has a higher probability of being disseminated extensively. The documentary showcases visual depictions of the rapid proliferation of a single flat earth video. It demonstrates the manner in which a user initially engages with the video, prompting the computer to recommend like content. As the number of users interacting with this particular material increases, the algorithms of the platform enhance its visibility, resulting in a cascade effect that quickly expands the video’s audience. Another portion showcases talks with psychologists and social scientists who elucidate the psychological aspects that render individuals vulnerable to embracing conspiracy theories. These scholars analyze the role of cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and the Dunning-Kruger effect. Confirmation bias is the tendency for individuals to actively search for information that supports their previous ideas.

## **3. #Pizzagate Conspiracy Theory**

“The Social Dilemma” highlights the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory in multiple scenarios to illustrate the potential harm that can arise from spreading false information. The documentary features interviews with renowned scholars and industry insiders who elucidate the origins and dissemination of the ideology. One portion provides an elaborate description of how the #Pizzagate idea, which falsely claimed that a child trafficking network involving influential politicians was being conducted from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., acquired popularity on the internet. The documentary illustrates how individuals on social media sites initiated the dissemination and magnification of these baseless assertions. Algorithms specifically created to enhance captivating content further disseminated these dramatic and emotionally charged postings, amplifying their prominence and believability among certain individuals. The documentary features interviews with psychologists who elucidate the reasons behind humans’ inclination to trust conspiracy theories, even in the absence of substantial evidence. The theory’s dissemination and acceptability were influenced by factors such as confirmation bias, which involves individuals actively seeking evidence that confirms their pre-existing opinions, as well as the emotional appeal of safeguarding vulnerable youngsters. The video includes a fictionalized portrayal of the armed assault on the pizzeria carried out by an individual who subscribed to the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory. This part offers a chilling examination of the immediate repercussions of deception. The footage depicts the assailant entering the restaurant, equipped with weapons and displaying a strong resolve to “rescue” the purported victims, only to discover that the accusations were unfounded. Interviews conducted with law enforcement personnel, as well as the restaurant’s staff and owners, highlight the profound dread and disruption that resulted from this horrific occurrence.

## **4. COVID-19 Disinformation**

“The Social Dilemma” dedicates multiple portions to illustrate the dissemination of disinformation about Covid-19, with the aim of emphasizing the wider problem of incorrect information on social media. One portion showcases interviews with specialists and IT insiders who elucidate the mechanisms by which disinformation regarding the virus, its

transmission, and its treatment became popular on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The documentary illustrates how social media algorithms, specifically engineered to optimize user interaction, frequently give precedence to sensational and provocative content. This prioritizing implies that disinformation, such as the assertion that Covid-19 is a fabrication, the belief that some unverified remedies can effectively treat the virus, or the notion that vaccines pose a threat, has the potential to rapidly spread and gain popularity. The documentary also features conversations with public health specialists who analyze the practical implications of this disinformation. The authors elucidate the manner in which unfounded assertions regarding the perils of vaccines have resulted in a substantial reluctance to receive vaccinations. This reluctance hampers public health endeavors to manage the virus, as a reduced number of individuals receiving vaccinations leads to diminished herd immunity and an increased likelihood of outbreaks. Another portion of the program showcases personal anecdotes of persons who have been impacted by the dissemination of false information regarding Covid-19. These anecdotes illustrate instances where individuals, swayed by inaccurate information, chose not to adhere to health guidelines, declined vaccines, and advocated for unverified treatments, often to their own disadvantage.

## **5. Hatred in Myanmar**

Scenes from the documentary show how hate speech against the Rohingya ethnic minority is disseminated on social media, leading to acts of brutality and genocide. In several moments from “The Social Dilemma,” it is shown how social media exacerbates ethnic tensions in Myanmar, especially those that target the Muslim Rohingya minority. The video focuses on how hate speech and false information targeting the Rohingya people were spread on Facebook in particular. One important section demonstrates how hateful and provocative remarks on the Rohingya were extensively disseminated on Facebook, frequently portraying them as outsiders and dangers to the Buddhist majority in Myanmar. Experts and journalists who were interviewed for the video describe how hate speech was unintentionally magnified by Facebook’s algorithms. Testimonies from Rohingya refugees and violence survivors are shown in another episode. They explain how social media was used to propagate misinformation and encourage attacks against their communities. These testimonies highlight the terrible real-world ramifications of hate speech online, which can result in genocide, displacement, and other crimes. The moral ramifications of social media firms’ facilitation of hate speech and false information are also covered in the movie. It calls into question whether digital companies have an obligation to keep an eye on and lessen the negative impacts that their content regulations and algorithms have on marginalized communities.

## **Structuring**

### **1. Algorithms and Political Polarization**

Social media algorithms prioritize content that elicits strong emotional reactions from users, whether those reactions are favorable or negative, in an effort to boost user engagement (Lischka, 2018). Users are exposed to perspectives that confirm their preexisting opinions in echo chambers created by these algorithms, which frequently spread extremist and sensational political information. Online spaces known as “echo chambers” cause people to see only information and viewpoints that support their own, reinforcing their beliefs and preventing them from being exposed to other points of view (Cinelli et al., 2021). Political rifts may widen as a result, and people may become less receptive to different points of view. Algorithm-driven polarization has an impact on electoral processes as well because partisan content and misinformation on social media platforms can greatly

sway public opinion and voting behavior. Algorithms can take advantage of cognitive biases like confirmation bias, which makes people favor information that strengthens their preconceived notions and solidifies their political opinions. As a result, there is a rise in polarization, a decline in confidence in institutions and mainstream media, and an increased vulnerability to misinformation. In order to lessen the divisive impact of social media businesses' algorithms, it is imperative that they address their ethical obligations. This involves putting policies in place to support accurate and varied information, as well as the requirement for algorithms' workings to be transparent. Legislative actions and industry best practices that could be taken to lessen algorithmic polarization include content moderation guidelines, algorithmic audits, and user education on media literacy.

## **2. Theories of Conspiracy and Disinformation**

The Flat Earth Theory asserts that the Earth is flat instead of being spherical, in direct opposition to current scientific understanding. The notion of a flat Earth encompasses several concepts, such as a finite-diameter flat disk, a rectangular flat surface with humans and the sky positioned on top, and even a dual Earth consisting of a flat plane where humans reside and a spherical Earth situated in the sky (Boyd, 2020). Even though the Flat Earth theory has been scientifically disproven, it gained popularity on social media because posts and videos that provoked strong reactions and prolonged user involvement were given preference by the algorithms. As a result, the hypothesis became well-known and attracted an unexpectedly large following. Similar to this, the #Pizzagate conspiracy theory quickly gained traction on social media and purported that a pizza was the headquarters of a major politician-led child trafficking organization. The documentary demonstrates how this disinformation campaign resulted in actual events, such as an armed assault on the eatery.

## **3. Public Health and Covid-19**

The dissemination of disinformation regarding Covid-19 encompassed inaccurate assertions concerning the virus's source, deceptive data regarding prevention and treatment, and baseless conjectures concerning vaccines. Social media algorithms, which are created to boost captivating content, frequently give priority to sensational and contentious messages, resulting in the extensive propagation of these inaccuracies. The consequences of this deception have been significant. The documentary features public health specialists who analyze the impact of disinformation on vaccine hesitancy, resulting in reduced vaccination rates and impeding the attainment of herd immunity. Erroneous information has also resulted in perilous actions, such as disregarding established health protocols like wearing masks and practicing social distance, thereby amplifying the transmission of the infection. The program also showcases real anecdotes of individuals impacted by Covid-19 deception, illustrating how it can result in devastating consequences, such as avoidable sickness and mortality.

## **4. Hate and Ethnic Violence**

The swift and extensive spread of this hateful language contributed to an atmosphere of apprehension and animosity, ultimately resulting in extreme violence and what numerous global witnesses have labeled as genocide. Research conducted by Soral et al. (2017) and Cervone et al. (2020) has demonstrated that being exposed to hate speech can result in desensitization, decreased appraisals of victims, and increased bias towards outgroups. Research has demonstrated that the use of derogatory and hateful words can significantly contribute to the emergence of intergroup violence and, in extreme cases, genocide (Cervone et al., 2020). The proliferation of hate speech on social media platforms has sparked worries, leading to substantial endeavors by governments, organizations,



and researchers to tackle this problem (Zhang & Luo, 2019). The documentary features interviews with specialists and individuals who have experienced it firsthand, providing insight into the tangible effects of hate speech on the internet. This example showcases the potential of social media to be used as a tool for provoking ethnic violence, highlighting the severe consequences of unregulated dissemination of false information and offensive language on susceptible groups. “The Social Dilemma” highlights the pressing necessity for social media platforms to assume accountability for the information they endorse.

### **Analysis of Varied Platforms and Algorithms**

It is essential to recognize that not all social media platforms function in the same way. Each platform—whether Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram—employs distinct algorithms with unique goals, structures, and impacts on information dissemination. These differences significantly influence how users interact with content and how disinformation is amplified or suppressed. For instance, Facebook’s algorithm prioritizes user engagement, often promoting posts that trigger strong emotional reactions such as anger or fear, which can make false or misleading content more likely to go viral (Tufekci, 2018). This emphasis on engagement creates an ecosystem where sensationalism can thrive, further contributing to the polarization of public opinion.

Meanwhile, YouTube’s recommendation engine focuses on maximizing watch time by suggesting related videos based on users’ viewing history. While this approach increases user retention, it can also lead individuals down a “rabbit hole” of increasingly extreme or conspiratorial content, reinforcing echo chambers and disinformation narratives (O’Callaghan et al., 2015). Twitter’s trending algorithms, which highlight the most talked-about topics, can inadvertently promote misleading or false information, especially during breaking news events or political crises. The speed and virality of tweets, combined with the limited character count, can make it easier for disinformation to spread before it is verified or corrected (Keller et al., 2020).

TikTok, on the other hand, uses a highly personalized “For You Page” driven by behavioral profiling that analyzes user interactions—such as likes, shares, watch time, and even pauses on videos—to deliver content. This can quickly lead to the viral spread of misinformation, especially among younger audiences who may lack media literacy skills to critically evaluate what they see (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Instagram, while primarily image-based, also leverages algorithms to promote content that generates high levels of interaction, which can include misleading memes or infographics that oversimplify complex issues.

### **Counterarguments: Efforts and Limitations in Curbing Disinformation**

Although *The Social Dilemma* critiques the role of social media platforms in disseminating disinformation, it is essential to recognize counterarguments that emphasize the initiatives undertaken by these companies to mitigate the problem. Critics argue that the film presents a one-sided narrative, omitting the ongoing initiatives by major platforms like Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok in combating disinformation. Meta, for example, has collaborated with independent fact-checkers in more than 60 nations to identify or limit the dissemination of misleading content (Meta, 2022). Twitter introduced labels and warning prompts for misleading tweets, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic and election periods (Twitter, 2021). YouTube has also updated its recommendation system to limit the spread of borderline and conspiracy-related content, reducing views of such videos by 70% in the U.S. (YouTube Official Blog, 2020).

Moreover, empirical research has shown that these interventions can have measurable effects. For example, a study by Guess et al. (2020) from the NYU Center for Social Media and Politics found that changes in Facebook's algorithm significantly decreased the visibility of political misinformation prior to the 2020 U.S. election. Similarly, Ledwich and Zaitsev (2019) demonstrated that YouTube's recommendation engine, post-adjustments, directed users away from extreme and conspiratorial content. However, these measures have faced criticism for lacking transparency, consistency, and sufficient enforcement. Researchers like Gillespie (2018) argue that while platforms adopt moderation policies, they often fail to fully align these policies with their commercial incentives, raising questions about the long-term effectiveness of such efforts.

## Conclusion

The documentary "The Social Dilemma" offers a powerful perspective on the widespread effects of misinformation on social media on society. This analysis has shown how the movie successfully demonstrates the complex processes by which disinformation propagates via algorithm-driven platforms, with grave repercussions for social cohesiveness, political division, and public opinion. The analysis reveals that social media algorithms prioritize interaction over factual accuracy, promoting sensationalized and deceptive information that supports users' preexisting opinions while suppressing opposing views. This relationship creates filter bubbles and echo chambers, which deepen societal divisions and weaken confidence in trustworthy information sources.

The documentary also highlights the pressing need for social media firms to be more accountable and transparent, stressing that in order to lessen the problems caused by disinformation, their operational frameworks must be guided by ethical principles. Ultimately, the findings of this research call for a collective responsibility among individuals, policymakers, and technology platforms to enhance digital literacy and combat misinformation. By fostering informed media consumption habits and promoting a culture of critical thinking, society can better navigate the complexities of the digital information landscape and safeguard the integrity of public discourse. Addressing the crisis of disinformation is not merely a technical challenge, but a profound societal imperative that requires concerted efforts across multiple fronts.

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