News Item

Misinformation Has Created a New World Disorder | Scientific American

By Claire Wardle

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> As someone who studies the impact of misinformation on society, I often wish the young entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley who enabled communication at speed had been forced to run a 9/11 scenario with their technologies before they deployed them commercially.
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> One of the most iconic images from that day shows a large clustering of New Yorkers staring upward. The power of the photograph is that we know the horror they're witnessing. It is easy to imagine that, today, almost everyone in that scene would be holding a smartphone. Some would be filming their observations and posting them to Twitter and Facebook. Powered by social media, rumors and misinformation would be rampant. Hate-filled posts aimed at the Muslim community would proliferate, the speculation and outrage boosted by algorithms responding to unprecedented levels of shares, comments and likes. Foreign agents of disinformation would amplify the division, driving wedges between communities and sowing chaos. Meanwhile those stranded on the tops of the towers would be livestreaming their final moments.
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> Stress testing technology in the context of the worst moments in history might have illuminated what social scientists and propagandists have long known: that humans are wired to respond to emotional triggers and share misinformation if it reinforces existing beliefs and prejudices. Instead designers of the social platforms fervently believed that connection would drive tolerance and counteract hate. They failed to see how technology would not change who we are fundamentally—it could only map onto existing human characteristics.
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