WE TRUST *EVERYTHING*, BUT DON'T TRUST *ANYTHING*

STORYTELLING IN SOCIAL MEDIA

SEAN FORMANTES

INTRODUCTION

Social media is the premiere online hub of communication, and within each platform is the ability to tell stories through a variety of different mediums.

Elements of storytelling are present across any type of design, including the UI/UX design of social media platforms. A 2020 article by Krishnan Vasudevan in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* examines how digital media – specifically social media and online journalistic platforms – are designed. Notably, Vasudevan points out the principles of color science and gestalt theory, writing:

> **"Designers and developers employ color science, gestalt, and metaphor to create user-centered interactive experiences for social networking platforms, entertainment media companies, and more recently for news organizations (Krippendorff, 2005). This necessitates that journalism and communication scholars examine how design is deployed to create user-friendly interfaces through which people engage with media and the design practices that are employed to create immersive, interactive stories."**

Storytelling principles are embedded within social media platforms in two ways:

1. The platform's UI/UX design
2. The content created and published by users

The use of storytelling on social media can be categorized around three different areas; each using a variety of design and storytelling principles:

1. Emotion
2. Experience
3. Evidence

EMOTION: CONTENT AS NARRATIVES

Creators have the ability to take viewers along narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. The emotional journeys outlined by Kurt Vonngeut can be applied to examine these narratives, demonstrating the use of emotion as a means of social media storytelling.

Social media strategist Brendan Kane shared his thoughts on what he deemed to be "content formats" in an episode of "The Futur with Chris Do" podcast. Kane's definition of formats extends past the typical basic understanding of photos, videos, and writing. Formats are discussed in terms of specific styles of storytelling which creators use in their content.

As an example of a content format, Kane discusses creator Erika Kullberg, who is a lawyer widely known for her finance-related content. Within her short-form videos, Kullberg routinely plays two different characters; typically a customer and an employee. This "one person playing two characters" style is a content format, and according to Kane, he and his team has documented hundreds of different formats for their clients to use.

Kullberg's typical short-form video format follows the emotional journey of Vonnegut's "man in hole." According to Ellen Lupton in *Design Is Storytelling*, this journey is one where the "Man falls in the hole" and "The people of the village rescue him." The customer (Kullberg) initiates something, and the employee refuses due to a store policy. Immediately, the emotional journey brings the story down into the hole. Then, Kullberg (as the customer) provides tips that show how to legally get around the policy, bringing us out of the hole.

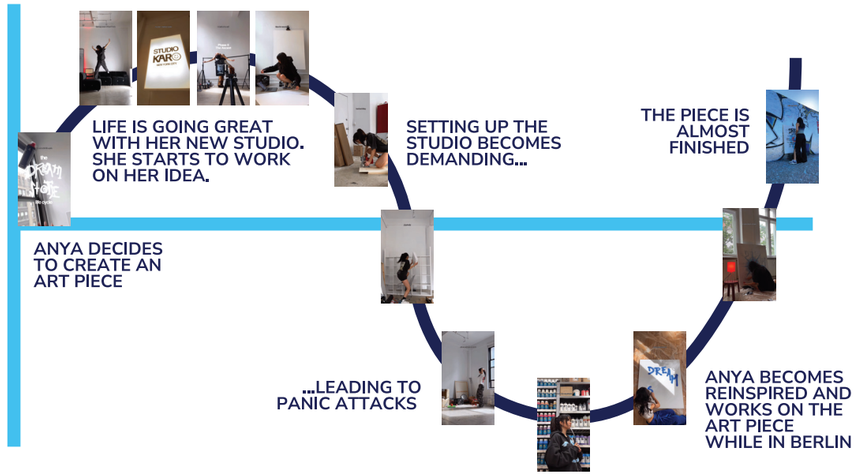
Another great example of a Vonnegut journey used in content comes from artist Anya Karolyn (@karocrafts), who uses social media in a vlog format to promote her work. In one video documenting the process of creating an art piece, she uses Vonnegut's "Boy Meets Girl" graph – everything is going great, then obstacles get in the way and brings the journey into a hole, then Karolyn finishes the piece, thereby bringing the journey back up.

Instagram carousels can be a narrative, as each slide builds upon the previous, leading the viewer into one direction. Such is the case with educational content, such as that of Chris Do's, which lead from a beginning to a specified end. It can be argued that most educational and value-based content follows only half of Vonnegut's chart for the Cinderella story. Most educational content, including those in a carousel format, feature tips that get the viewer out of a hole to solve a specific problem. However, once the top is reached, seldom does the content then drop back towards the bottom, nor need it drop.

THE MAN IN HOLE *ERIKA KULLBERG*

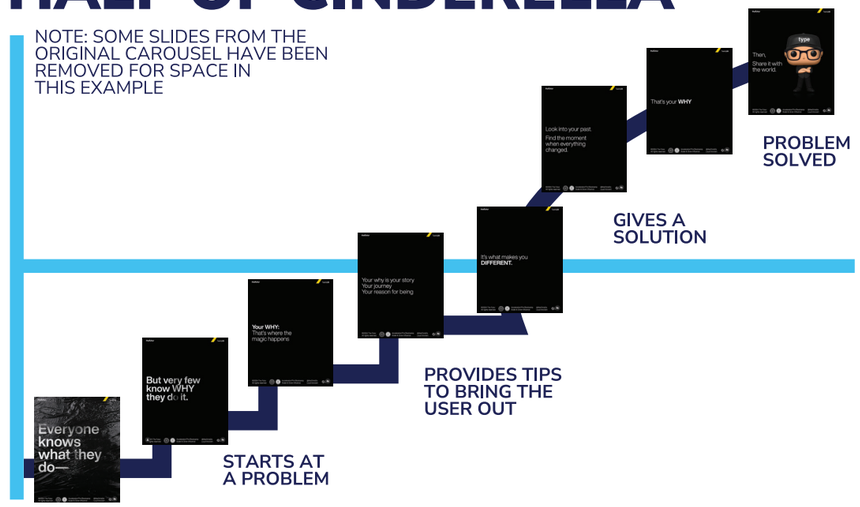
IMAGES: Screengrabs from Erika Kullberg (@erikankullberg) Reel on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCZHhMnMs3K/?igsh=bml0aGF0ZG1vOXYy)

BOY MEETS GIRL *ANYA KAROLYN*



IMAGES: Screengrabs from Anya Karolyn (@karocrafts) Reel on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAtX-689Rcup/?igsh=MWtlcGg0NmJ-4YTRtbA%3D%3D)

HALF OF CINDERELLA *CHRIS DO*



IMAGES: Screengrabs from Chris Do (@thechrisdo) Carousel on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/p/DCo0hZtP7Lu/?igsh=MWFhZnE3b3VzNnJvdg%3D%3D&img_index=1)

EXPERIENCE: PLATFORMS AND CONTENT

In the previously shared Kullberg example, critical thinking reveals it is the viewer who actually represents the man in the hole. Kullberg represents the villagers who rescue us – the helpless customer – out of our established dilemma (despite her initially acting as the customer). Content, therefore, is not only an emotional connection, but a user experience rooted in journeys.

According to Pola Zen in an article for Yotpo about making effective marketing images, "Once we immerse ourselves in a story, the action of looking at something becomes an experience. And an experience leads to an emotional connection." Social media, however, is not only a collection of static images, but also a hub of interaction; full with videos, text, and many affordances. This experience, therefore, is both incredibly strong and monetizable.

In 1998, a *Harvard Business Review* article by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore urged businesses to harness the emerging experience economy, writing:

> **"Today we can identify and describe this fourth economic offering because consumers unquestionably desire experiences, and more and more businesses are responding by explicitly designing and promoting them… the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences."**

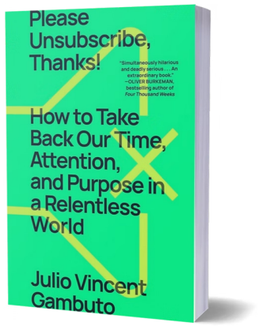
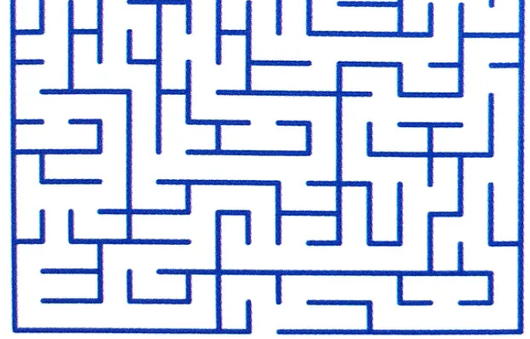


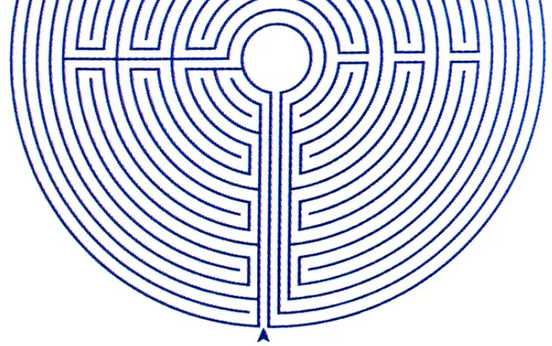
IMAGE: juliovincent.com/please

Social media companies are using the experience economy to their advantage as part of their successful business model. In *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks!*, filmmaker Julio Vincent Gambuto details an argument as to how what he deems as "click-up economy" powered by technology has led to a system where the "Big Forces" (including "Big Tech") have created a technologically-based system that society is stuck with. According to Gambuto, "those with the capital and foresight to monetize our social connectedness stood to gain significantly." Indeed, social media represents the monetization of social connectedness, and it uses storytelling to its monetary benefit.

CONTENT, THEREFORE, IS NOT ONLY AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION, BUT A USER EXPERIENCE ROOTED IN JOURNEYS.



MAZE Puzzle designed to confuse



LABYRINTH Long, guided path

IMAGE: Design is Storytelling by Ellen Lupton. Image reshared and sourced from Maya P. Lim in UX Collective (https://uxdesign.cc/building-your-labyrinth-2f9589f2016a)

THE NEVER-ENDING LABYRINTH/MAZE OF INFINITE SCROLL

In *Design is Storytelling*, Ellen Lupton defines IKEA as a labyrinth, distinguishing the definition of the concept from that of a maze.

> **"A maze is a puzzle with hidden turns and dead ends where a wanderer could be lost forever. A labyrinth is a fixed path, designed to carry a person along a controlled journey with a clear beginning and end."**

By these definitions, the infinite scroll feeds on many social media platforms do not classify as being fully a labyrinth or a maze. However, feeds do share similarities with both:

INFINITE SCROLL AS A LABYRINTH: An infinite scroll is a fixed path downwards. But an infinite scroll is infinite, meaning that there is no dictated end.

INFINITE SCROLL AS A MAZE: Users can click on different affordances in a feed – such as the like and comment buttons – and can even jump onto other profiles and pages. While like and comment buttons represent dead ends, jumping off onto other pages also implies that the user leaves the maze, and that the user can exit at any given turn. Alongside this, the feed as a maze has no defined end.

Either way, an infinite experience – one with twists and turns along a fixed path with no clear resolution – keeps users beholden and addicted to finding an end result they will never receive. Users fall into the behavioral economic principle of default, where "People tend to choose the easiest option to avoid complex decisions," according to a Bridgeable article. "Defaults provide a cognitive shortcut and signal what people are supposed to do." Most social media feeds are infinite scroll feeds, thus, the default within the UI/UX design is to scroll. Aza Raskin, the designer of infinite scroll, stated his regret, according to a 2019 article by Tom Knowles for *The Times*. "I know as a designer," stated Raskin, "that by taking away the stopping cue, I can make you do what I want you to do." How so? Because of the default infinite scroll, the default behavior of the user is to scroll forever.

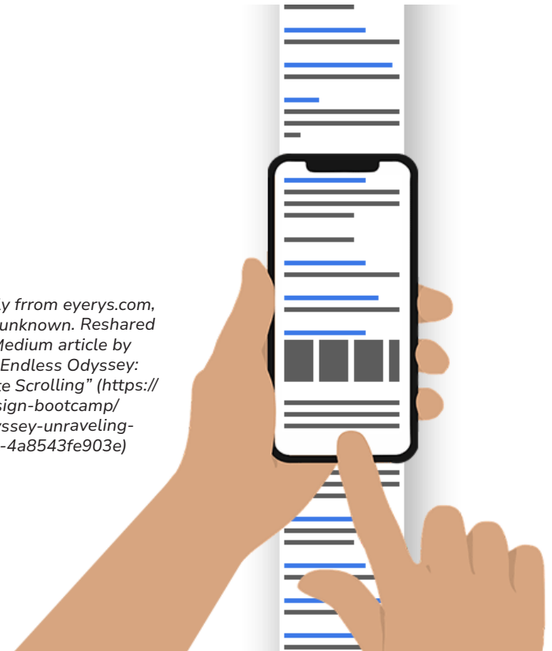


IMAGE: Originally frrom eyerys.com, author/designer unknown. Reshared and sourced in Medium article by Maria Kud, "The Endless Odyssey: Unraveling Infinte Scrolling" (https://medium.com/design-bootcamp/the-endless-odyssey-unraveling-infinite-scrolling-4a8543fe903e)

IT CAN BE ARGUED THAT THE USER IS THEREFORE CONDITIONED TO ASSOCIATE THE LIKE BUTTON OR NOTIFICATION BUTTON WITH ACTION; THEREBY KEEPING USERS BEHOLDEN TO SOCIAL MEDIA.

IMAGE: Facebook Like Button. Wikipedia. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Like_button#/media/File:Bot%C3%B3n_Me_gusta.svg)

AFFORDANCES: LIKE BUTTONS AND NOTIFICATIONS

Vasudevan describes the Facebook like button as an affordance, writing:

> **"Although in one sense the Like button provided Facebook users more capacity to engage with content on the platform, it marketized affect to support its advertising platform... The "imagined affordances," as described by Nagy and Neff (2015) offered by Facebook and other social media platforms, have been weaponized to encourage users to engage with content on their platforms."**

The like button is an affordance that signals to the viewer how they can showcase appreciation. The creator then receives these likes based on this affordance; one that provides minimal intrinsic value. Users are drawn to continue their use of social media platforms because of the weaponization of such affordances.

Vasudevan also highlights the use of color within notifications (which is an affordance as well, since it tells the user to interact in some way). Vasudean writes, "The red dots used on Facebook or the pink circles employed on Instagram to signify new messages or alerts appeal to a person's motivation to complete tasks and also their emotional need to see the newest content from their social networks (Eyal, 2014)" Red, notably, is a strong color. According to Céillie Clark-Keane, red represents "excitement, passion, anger, danger, action, anxiety, [and] power" based on color theory. When using red, social media platforms correlated notification to these ideas, therefore creating the idea of an important alert the user should attend to.

According to a Don Norman quote stated in an article by the Interaction Design Foundation, "When affordances are taken advantage of, the user knows what to do just by looking: no picture, label, or instruction needed." Thus, when a social media user interacts with an affordance, it is an instantly understood behavior. It can be argued that the user is therefore conditioned to associate the like button or notification icon with action; thereby keeping users beholden to social media.

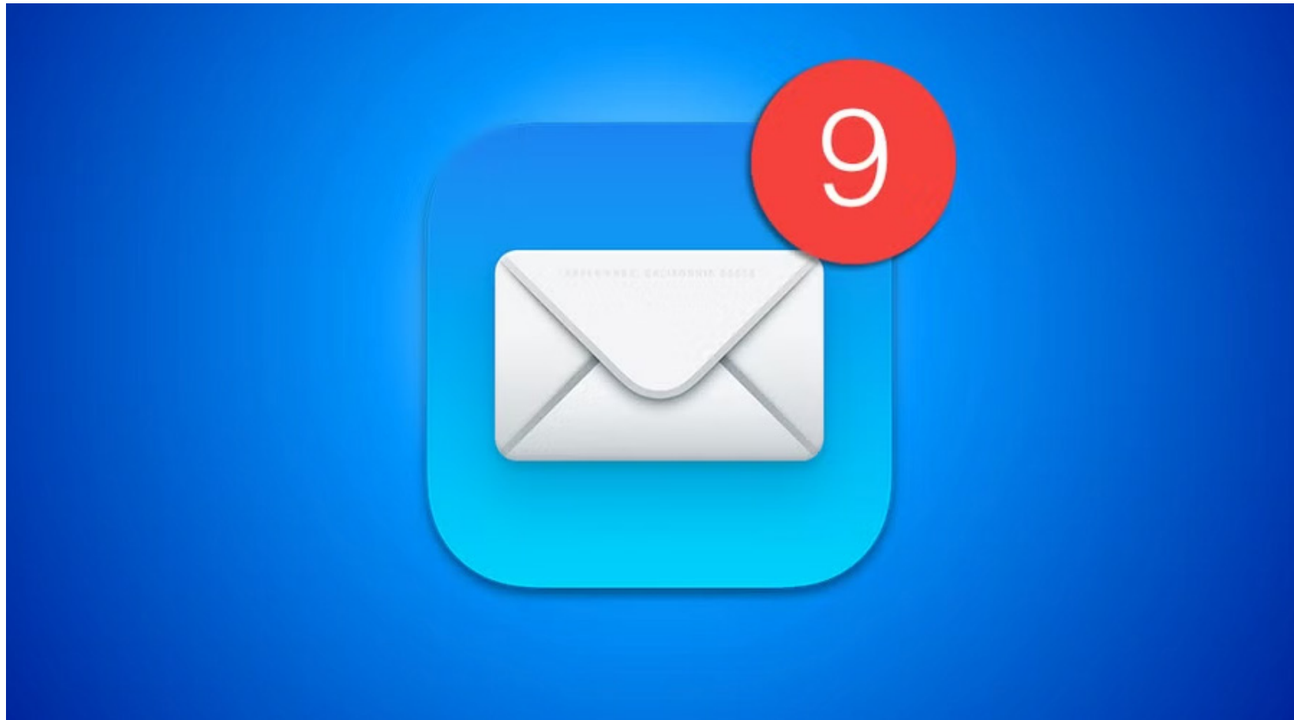


IMAGE: Sourced from How-To Geek (https://www.howtogeek.com/741168/how-to-hide-red-notification-badges-on-mac/)

EVIDENCE: FALSE CREDIBILITY

Evidence itself is not technically a principle of storytelling. However, evidence is typically presented through the lens of factual storytelling, as seen in the journalistic and scientific fields. According to Fabiola Cristina Rodríguez Estrada and Lloyd Spencer David in an article for *Science Communication*, "Visual representation of science information can include a diversity of styles and techniques such as highly literal imagery, abstract images, diagrams, symbolic notations, and infographics (data visualizations) among others." Similarly, social media content uses a variety of visual techniques to communicate both true – and false – information.

This section argues that social media sites have manipulated the use of storytelling practices – those similarly present in these factually-based industries – in order to promote the spread of misinformation and disinformation in an equally effective manner.

Logically, the effectiveness of storytelling is not equivalent to credibility. A 2019 study published in the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* details an experiment in which people were presented information about a fake innovation through a social media format. According to authors Patrick Weber and Yannick Grauer, telling stories about the innovation in a narrative format "...proved to be irrelevant to the facilitation of trust in the innovation..."

Alongside this, trust on social media is diminished as people become more aware of the untruthfulness of a lot of content. For example, creator Brock Johnson (@brock12johnson) produced an Instagram video in which he demonstrates how what initially seems like a nice recording setup in an office is actually just a printed bookshelf background propped up in a closet. However, when framed a certain way, the space looks like an office. The viewer would not know otherwise, had Johnson not zoomed out to show the full space.

This lack of trust is also parallel with high levels of trust. Paradoxically, we trust everything, but don't trust anything. This is especially true when it comes to the creator economy. In 2023, Jesisca Deyo, in an article for Marketing Dive, reported the following statistics from research conducted by Matter Communications:

> **"... 69% of consumers trust influencers, friends and family over information coming directly from a brand... Consumers also continue to seek out influencers who spark a sense of familiarity..."**

Influencers are making money from brand deals and other promotions because of viewer familiarity driving purchases. This familiarity is driven by trust, however, this trust is given to those with minimal credibility.

THIS LACK OF TRUST IS ASSOCIATED WITH HIGH LEVELS OF TRUST. PARADOXICALLY, WE TRUST EVERYTHING, BUT DON'T TRUST ANYTHING.

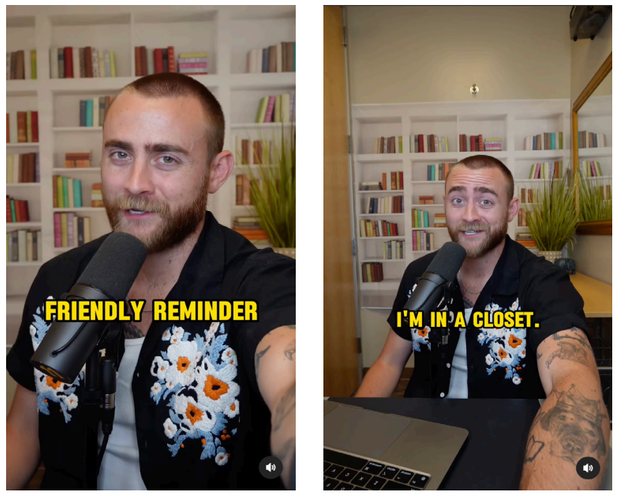


IMAGE: Secreengrabs of Instagram Reel by @brock12johnson (https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_SfkNGo7Q1/?igsh=bzBmbnFreG5ycWsz)

IMAGE: CBS News article (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fake-news-headlines-viral-what-to-know/)

JOURNALISM: MIS/DISINFORMATION IN THE NEWS

Misinformation and disinformation is heavily prevalent on many social media networks. A study conducted by Gizem Ceylan, Ian A. Anderson, and Wendy Wood, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, found that people who routinely share news articles on social media also tend to share mis/disinformation. In an experiment where participants viewed both real and fake Facebook articles in a simulation and were given to share these articles, people with the habit of constantly sharing articles to their feed "often shared misinformation out of habit, reacting automatically to the familiar platform cues in which headlines were presented in the standard manner (i.e., Facebook format of a photograph, source, headline) with the sharing response arrow underneath," according to Ceylan et. al.

Additionally, the study found that social media platforms incentivize the spread of mis/disinformation. "We recognize that habitual users are integral to social media sites' ad-based profit models (27)," writes Ceylan et. al., "and thus these sites are unlikely to create reward structures that encourage thoughtful decisions that impede habits. However, social media reward systems built to maximize user engagement are misaligned with the goal of promoting accurate content sharing, especially among regular, habitual users." Because the focus of social media platforms is on engagement, this is done at the cost of misinformation and disinformation becoming prominent on these platforms.

False narratives spread like wildfire across the digital information ecosystem, starting with social media platforms first. According to Darrell M. West in an article for The Brookings Institution, there were many instances of social media disinformation during the 2024 U.S. election.

> "These and other efforts were successful in shaping the campaign narrative because they were disseminated broadly on social media platforms, promoted through funny memes, picked up and publicized by mainstream media outlets, circulated by internet mega-influencers, and amplified by leading candidates during rallies, debates, and interviews... the 2024 campaign was rife with organized efforts to sway voters, twist perceptions, and make people believe negative material about various candidates."

West also mentions disinformation coming from other countries, giving the example of a Russian-based video pushing a misleading narrative about a Haitian man supposedly committing electoral fraud. False narratives, such as this story, can impact the perceptions of voters in an election. Decisions affecting an entire nation can be – and were – made based on misleading and false information prevalent on social media networks. Connecting to the study by Ceylan et. al., habitual sharing of this type of disinformation only amplifies it further.

IMAGE: The Brookings Institution article by Darrell M. West. Originally from Jonathan Raa, NurPhoto. (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-disinformation-defined-the-2024-election-narrative/)

THE DOWNSIDE IS THAT TRUTHFUL INFORMATION IS ALSO COMPETING AGAINST FALSE INFORMATION; BOTH USING POWERFUL STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES TO SWAY VIEWERS.

IMAGE: Jonathan Borba / Pexels. (https://www.pexels.com/photo/man-wearing-blue-scrub-suit-and-mask-sitting-on-bench-3279197/)

SCIENCE: COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A study published in *Health Communication* in 2023 by Stephanie M. Pangborn, et. al. reveals insights into the Twitter posts of frontline healthcare providers (FHPs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Pangborn, et. al., "FHPs relied upon Twitter as a narrative resource to humanize COVID-19 and its impact, which had been convoluted by incomprehensible statistics, misinformation, and politicized discourses." These FHPs took it upon themselves to be purveyors of scientific fact. The study notes how during conducted interviews of these professionals, "FHPs explained a desire to be seen as sources of professional, unbiased, firsthand perspectives that the public learns to trust."

However, despite the Tweets and storytelling narratives of these first responders, misinformation and disinformation still thrived online. Pangborn, et. al., mention examples of disinformation, such as hydroxychloroquine being promoted as a cure to the COVID-19 pandemic, amongst other narratives regarding the virus thrown around in political arenas.

Despite widespread mis/disinformation, frontline workers still turned to storytelling, as Pangborn et. al. notes that "social media became a linchpin for weaving their one-of-a-kind vantage point in a critical public conversation." Although they have come to serve as hosts and amplifiers of lies, social media platforms are also places where truth and fact can be shared and discussed. The downside is that truthful information is also competing against false information; both using powerful storytelling techniques to sway viewers.

IMAGE: Elon Musk. The Royal Society, sourced from Wikipedia. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elon_Musk#/media/File:Elon_Musk_Royal_Society_crop.jpg)

VERIFICATION OF USERS

The verification badge, also known as the blue check mark, was intended as a signifier of a user's authenticity (and thereby can be viewed as an affordance signifying that the user can interact with a notable figure). According to Later Social Media Management, "The blue checkmark is typically given to accounts that are of public interest, such as those belonging to celebrities, public figures, or brands," as a means to identify legitimacy.

This understanding has since evolved. After Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter (and subsequent rebranding to X), the verification badge changed from being provided to accounts considered "active, notable, and authentic," to any account "actively subscribed to X Premium," according to the platform's verification guidelines. The verification badge was turned into a badge of subscription rather than a badge of notability or credibility. According to an analysis by Brian Fung for CNN, "Musk has helped erode the value of the blue check at precisely the moment he's betting on it to help drive subscription revenue for his company..."

The ability to pay for the verification badge has also been implemented by Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram. Starting at $14.99 a month, the subscription provides the badge after proof of a government I.D., according to Meta Platforms.

THE VERIFICATION BADGE WAS TURNED INTO A BADGE OF SUBSCRIPTION RATHER THAN A BADGE OF NOTABILITY OR CREDIBILITY.

IMAGE: "Blue Checkmark" for Twitter, Wikipedia. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter_verification#/media/File:Twitter_Verified_Badge.svg)

CONCLUSION

The use of storytelling principles have been effective in generating user engagement on social media. They have also helped large tech companies translate user engagement into profit. What can be done to counteract this seeming weaponization?

The study by Ceyaln, et. al. suggests “the restructuring of reward systems on social media” as well as “[building] on the current structure and design of social media platforms to disrupt habitual news sharing or increase friction on it” to counteract disinformation. The solution to countering the negative impact of storytelling could be similar.

However, the likelihood of platforms being restructured remains unlikely. Therefore, users must be taught to become aware of how storytelling is being used for and against them on the evolving digital web.

USERS MUST BE TAUGHT TO BECOME AWARE OF HOW STORYTELLING IS BEING USED FOR AND AGAINST THEM ON THE EVOLVING DIGITAL WEB.

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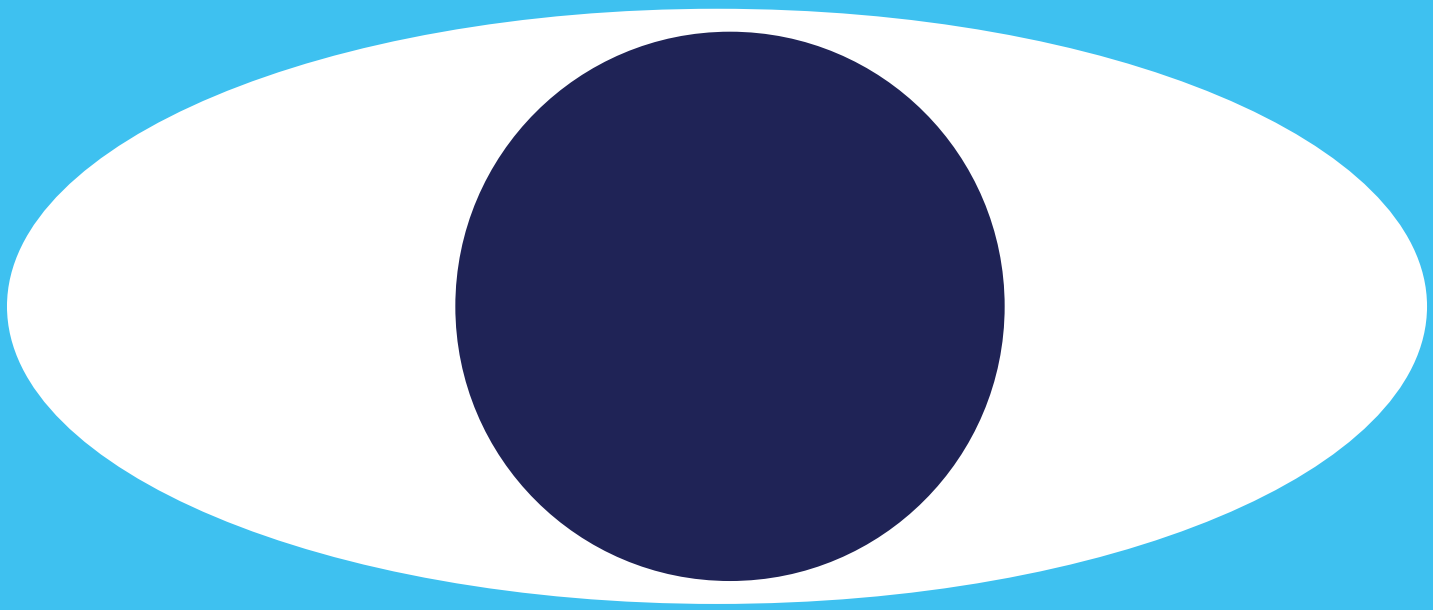

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