
Cracking Down on Disinformation

Videos:

“Obama Sounds Alarm On Dangers Of Disinformation”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKkNpx45i3Y> (5:54 minutes)

“The great 'disinformation' panic”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYCNE4dnG70> (8:46 minutes)

Guide:

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video.

Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

Analysis Questions:

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. In the MSNBC video, Clint Watts said “people are too often choosing the information that suits what they want to hear, from people that look like them and talk like them.” What did he mean by this? Have you experienced this yourself?
3. In the Reason video, Jacob Siegel said a narrative has been pushed that disinformation is so threatening that it requires a “wartime response and a wartime mobilization, meaning the suspension of due process, of constitutional rights and protections....” Have you experienced this narrative? Have you heard that disinformation is a major threat to democracy?
4. Clint Watts said that recent polling showed all-time lows in the public’s trust in the government and the media. Do you think this is due to disinformation? Why/Why not? What level of trust do you have in the government and the media?
5. Jacob Siegel said that there’s a progressive mindset that individuals are prone to being fooled into making incorrect decisions, and therefore need experts to guide them. Are people too gullible to be trusted to come to their own conclusions about information and disinformation? Why/Why not?
6. In the MSNBC video, Barack Obama said social media companies are partly to blame for disinformation. Do you agree? Why/Why not?
7. The Reason video included a clip of Sam Harris saying that he would approve if media companies covered up news stories to deter Donald Trump from being re-elected in 2020,

even if the news stories involved serious crimes. Do you agree? Do the ends justify the means? Why/Why not?

8. Clint Watts said: “[S]ocial media companies have for far too long focused very heavily on increasing the number of users and user engagement, and what we’ve found with user engagement is that [disinformation] tend to proliferate and spread very, very quickly.” Have you seen disinformation spread on social media? If so, what are some examples?
9. Jacob Siegel said there’s a ruling class that believes “it is in the best position to decide…what information can be seen, what information can’t be seen.” Is this a fair assessment? Did you get this impression from Barack Obama and Clint Watts in the MSNBC video?
10. Clint Watts said: “Companies will have to pick a side: you’re either a tech company that works with authoritarians or you’re a tech company that supports democracy.” What did he mean by this?
11. The Reason video featured this quote from mathematician Eric Hughes: “Information does not just want to be free, it longs to be free.” What did Hughes mean by this?
12. The MSNBC video cited a study that showed that Fox News viewers had “measurable changes in their understanding of current events” after watching CNN for 30 days. What does this tell us about disinformation?
13. In the Reason video, Zach Weissmueller said private encrypted messaging and decentralized social media platforms are “potential escape hatches.” What did he mean by this? Is it important to maintain private and decentralized platforms for information and communication? Why/Why not?
14. Clint Watts said some social media algorithms play to confirmation bias. What is confirmation bias?
15. Zach Weissmueller said in order to protect liberal democracy, we need “unfettered access to real information about how our government operates, and the freedom to talk about that information amongst ourselves without state interference.” Do you agree with this statement? Why/Why not?
16. Clint Watts said: “When there’s an alternative, people are open-minded, but they have to be able to see it.” What did he mean by this?
17. Jacob Siegel said the “old rule” in America was “a liberal democracy that favored a pluralistic outlook…” What did he mean by this? Would cracking down on disinformation threaten this pluralistic outlook? Why/Why not?
18. Do you think disinformation is currently a major threat to democracy? Why/Why not?
19. Do you think the government cracking down on disinformation is a major threat to freedom of speech? Why/Why not?

20. Is there a difference between the government regulating disinformation and tech companies regulating disinformation? If so, what is the difference?
21. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
22. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
23. Did you have an opinion on this topic before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from these videos that affects your views on this topic?
24. What else would you like to learn about this topic?