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Just Trust Me (2023-2024)

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“Just Trust Me” Gabrielle Wall (argument example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

In this argument essay, Wall takes up the idea of disinformation in search engines, social media posts, and through technology such as AI generated content or deep fakes. As you read Wall’s essay, consider:

- Wall makes an early distinction between disinformation and misinformation and later between online propaganda and other profit-driven media choices. How do these distinctions work in her argument? How are they effective in strengthening her claims for the need for regulation?
- In moving through different sources, motives, and technology connected to disinformation, Wall then makes the argument for AI regulation. How do you see this sequence of ideas building up to that call to action? What does this suggest about the ways you are (or are not) using a call to action in your own argument?
- Wall’s argument, “Just Trust Me,” features a title that can be read multiple ways—in the way that disinformation can make an appeal to readers and viewers or as a kind of play on that mentality asking the reader to “just trust” her. How did you originally read this title? What does it suggest about the power of titles or how titling can work within your own argument?

Just Trust Me by Gabrielle Wall

The American Psychological Association defines disinformation as “false information which is deliberately intended to mislead” (para. 1). There is a strong distinction between disinformation and misinformation, which is simply getting the facts wrong. Disinformation is an intentional and conscious attempt to spread false information in order to sway an audience. Misinformation, however, is the product of the lack of analytical thinking in discerning fact from falsehood. The former runs rampant on social media sites. The intentional spread of fake news is a major concern amongst voters; those who are making decisions about our nation’s future. Making an intelligent and informed decision about the government systems in America is nearly impossible when nearly a third of the information online is false (Pew Research Center). Fake news and online propaganda diminish the power and credibility of your vote in America.

Some believe the hysteria surrounding fake news is simply a distraction from the greater issues in reporting. They argue that fake news is not the major issue at hand, it’s the fact that media sites use fake news to gain clicks. Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde argues, “the biggest obstacle to having an informed electorate isn’t fake news but, rather, the ever more commercial, profit-seeking media seeking clicks and eyeballs...” (para. 18). Mudde believes that the issue is not just fake news, it’s the fact that all media sites simply want attention. I don’t completely disagree with Mudde. I believe it is an issue that media sites are spreading clickbait false information in order to gain profit. However, fake news on social media is an uncontrolled wildfire that gains strength with every advancement of technology. Information spread through

technology is a part of knowledge circulation that cannot be ignored and the falsehoods affect the way democracy performs in the U.S.

A majority of the vote lies in the hands of those who are also most likely to use social media. The Pew Research Center contends that 80% of individuals aged 18-49 years of age use social media in some capacity. Furthermore, they have found that Facebook is the most commonly used platform amongst the same demographic. Instagram is much more popular amongst the 18-29 years old demographic. This means that the same people who influence the vote are exposed daily to information spread on these platforms. This information can include a type of disinformation called propaganda.

Propaganda has been an issue in the public eye for a long time. For thousands of years, people have strategically manipulated information in order to sway public opinion. The 20th century saw a significant rise of true propaganda. The political atmosphere of the time, combined with the constant involvement in war, contributed to the perfect environment for propaganda to thrive. The general public was filled with fear of conflict and economic downturn, which made them incredibly easy to manipulate. Propaganda contributed to the rise of Hitler, the distrust towards the Communist East, and the continued antagonism towards the Middle East. The vote of the people is affected by the manipulation of information by officials.

Propaganda is also spread online through things other than false information. It can also be inflammatory statements targeted at a specific community. Cailin O'Connor and James Weatherall reference two different examples of a post one may make. They propose "You might consider the difference between the statements, 'candidate X wants to admit 620,000 refugees into the U.S.' and 'f*** the elections!' It's clear how the first statement might hurt a political candidate, but the second might do the same with no falsehood involved. This was the sort of propaganda that Russia tried to use to try to discourage African Americans from voting in the 2016 election" (pg. 2). The first statement that the authors reference hurts "candidate X", refugees, and the immigrant community. The information is not only simply false, it affects minority communities in the U.S. With the second statement, it's not blatantly false and harmful information. It attempts to discourage certain minority groups from voting is extremely dangerous and makes the polling results much less representative of the overall community. This kind of propaganda targeted at the African American community affected the 2016 election and may have helped Trump to win. This kind of social media propaganda is a real issue and affects democracy in America.

Considering how far extremist groups go to infiltrate them, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook are crucial points in the circulation of information in the modern world. One fifth of Americans get a majority of their news from social media (Pew Research Center). Social media is an important method of gaining awareness for issues, allowing for the spread of things like GoFundMe crowdfund campaigns and political petitions. Without these platforms, activists would have a much harder time gaining support for their causes. However, this method of spreading information also allows for people with poor intentions to spread their beliefs like wildfire. Some relevant examples are the recent events surrounding self-proclaimed "alpha male" Andrew Tate. Teachers all around the world are fearful for the next generation of men due to the misogynistic ideals Tate spreads to the young boys exposed to his content. In one quote, he speaks on women who have decided against having children. He says, "When I speak to some of these feminists who're like 'I don't want kids', I think you are the

most miserable stupid b*tch in the world". This kind of worldview is dangerous for women and if this kind of information can be spread to countless young boys online, it will eventually show up outside of the internet. Tate has recently been arrested under suspicion of human trafficking and organized crime. He cites false and skewed statistics in his debates online and presents opinion as fact. Tate's follower count is over 5 million and a majority of those people will vote in an election one day. The influence of someone like Tate could lead someone to believing they should take away the rights of others. O'Connor and Weatherall write, "on social media, memes, images, and claims can be widely broadcast by users" (pg. 2). Anything can be widely spread by anyone on social media and it contributes to how people think and act and therefore, vote.

Controlling disinformation is a current issue for many social media platforms. Meta, the company that controls Facebook and Instagram, started an initiative to control disinformation about the COVID-19 crisis. This initiative encourages users to research on their own, rather than simply believe what a post says. They provide a link to the World Health Organization and the CDC on information about the virus and the vaccine. This initiative was an important first step in controlling disinformation on social media. I believe these need to be expanded to encompass political information and clickbait posts. There should be resources linked to information about candidates and laws. Clickbait posts should be flagged for disinformation. A government agency would help impose these regulations on all social media sites. Social media companies should also be tasked with the initiative of regulative falsehoods and inflammatory rhetoric on their sites. Jacob Mchangama, free speech expert and activist believes, "An alternative strategy to outright legal bans is to combine legal measures with social and political pressure on technology companies to more aggressively police hate speech on their platforms" (para. 8). Mchangama believes that instead of banning certain types of information or speech, legal and social pressure should be placed on the individual companies to help regulate the fire of hate. Government policies should be combined with effort from social media companies to help contain fake news and redirect the public mind towards the truth.

Other kinds of technology also allow for the further spread of propaganda. Things like search result bias and deep fake technology reinforce the ideals of certain political groups and provide the necessary "proof" they need to sway others toward their side. This allows for political groups to spread things like propaganda and affect the voting results. Jonathan Albright, a communications professor at Elon University referenced in investigative journalist Carole Cadwaldr's article, was researching the ways in which rightwing websites spread their message through Google search results. He concludes, "This is a propaganda machine. It's targeting people individually to recruit them to an idea" (pg. 6). Albright's research indicated that Google acted as an amplification machine for rightwing propaganda. With deep fake technology and similar forms of artificial intelligence, it can be nearly impossible to figure out what is real and what is not in this technological age. These fake images and videos can serve as proof for one side of an argument. Even if they are false, it's incredibly hard to disprove the validity of a video. These forms of technology increase the prevalence of propaganda and disinformation online.

One information providing technology that contributes to the spread of online propaganda is Google. Google is the all-knowing giver of knowledge. We trust it without a second thought and often click on the first result when searching for an answer. It's a machine and therefore cannot have the bias of a human answer, or even one found in a book. However, asking Google to remain unbiased is no different from asking a politician to remain unbiased. The very nature of A.I. learning means that humans teach it. The more people look something up and click on a

certain result, the more a certain result shows up. This means someone with a particular agenda can sway search results by sharing a link over and over and spreading their message. More and more people will open the link and push the result to the top. In her article “Google, democracy, and the truth about the internet search”, Carole Cadwaladr writes that “This is an entirely circular knowledge economy that has only one outcome: an amplification of the message” (pg. 6). The internet is completely influenced by the people who use it and when a majority of the people sharing links and searching for a certain result sway in one direction, the whole of the internet will sway in that direction as well. It creates an information feedback loop, reinforcing the ideas of those who know exactly what they’re looking for.

Deep fakes are a type of technology that can be used to create a hyper realistic fake video of someone’s face and voice without their consent. This video can be used to make it look like a person is doing or saying anything they want. For example, an issue was raised amongst school officials in a Texas school district after a student created sexually inappropriate deep fake content of a staff member (Martinez, New York Post). The staff member was unable to simply say “that’s not me”, as it was her face and voice in the video. Police were involved, resources and time were spent, and the staff member was humiliated over and over again. This technology should not lie in the hands of the general public when it can be used for such nefarious purposes. This technology has also been used to create similar videos of government officials, especially targeting minority members of our government. Imagine logging onto Facebook after heading to the polls, only to find a deep fake video of the senator you voted for promoting the KKK. A deep fake video can be extremely accurate and maybe you wouldn’t know that it’s fake. You would feel cheated out of a vote and it might even discourage you from voting again in the future.

There are legislative steps our government could take to prevent the effects of these forms of disinformation on the democratic process. Laws can be put into place in order to minimize the access the general public has to advanced AI technology. Laws can also be put in place to punish those who use A.I. technology in a criminal fashion. The technology that allows people to create deep fakes also allows them to create false and offensive videos of anyone they want, including government officials and children. These examples are inappropriate uses of the technology and should be considered criminal. Certain access to this technology needs to be limited and kept within the confines of the government and misuse should be criminalized, much like you would weapon technology. Congressman and computer scientist Ted Lieu says, “What we need is a dedicated agency to regulate AI.” He references regulating A.I. in mass production, such as use in law enforcement, large machinery, and healthcare. However, with the rise of disinformation in public online spaces, the general public also needs guidelines and restrictions when it comes to the criminal use of artificial intelligence. A public agency is an efficient way to create those guidelines with the rapid advancement of technology.

Controlling who has access to certain technologies and what kind of information people are allowed to spread raises some issues with the First Amendment of the Constitution. Some may believe taking the control out of the people’s hands is unfair and unjust. The restriction of the use of certain technologies in order to prevent democratic collapse may violate the people’s right to free speech. However, I believe that the general public has no need for the kinds of technologies being used for nefarious purposes. If the public has limited access to military weaponry, why should we allow words to be used as weapons against democracy in the U.S? The general public should not be forced to decide what is good information and what is bad information when there are experts trained to do that very thing. If social media companies join the effort to stop

misinformation and disinformation online, it may comfort the minds of those who believe it is a restriction of free speech by a controlling government. Social media companies would be working with government regulations to prevent the spread of falsehoods, rather than information being banned.

Disinformation and online propaganda are leeches on the lifeblood of democracy. In order to prevent falsehoods from infecting the minds of voting Americans, companies and the government must take steps to regulate these types of fake news from circulating. It is in the hands of experts to determine which information is inflammatory, false, or propaganda. American voters need to push for regulation in A.I. Technology. A government agency needs to be developed in order to control the spread of disinformation online and change starts with the people. Fake news is not a distraction, it is at the forefront of communication in the modern age and we cannot ignore the way it diminishes the democratic processes we enjoy.

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