



INTERSECTIONS OF INFLUENCE: EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN MASS MEDIA AND SECURITY

Date: February 15, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On February 15, 2024, Dr. Scott Watson presented *Intersections of Influence: Exploring the Nexus between Mass Media and Security*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CISIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the significant role of mass media in shaping public perceptions and policymaker attitudes on various security levels; the diffusion of media ownership, particularly in social media, allows for broader participation yet lacks the journalistic norms and ethics seen in traditional media; and how all types of media can produce insecurity through the spread of simplistic narratives, false equivalencies, the decline in societal trust, and the platforming of foreign influences.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Watson discussed the ways that media, especially social media platforms, can inadvertently generate insecurity through simplistic narratives and lack of journalistic norms. The presentation shed light on the dual role of mass media as both a mirror and molder of societal perceptions, particularly regarding security issues. He also explored potential remedies, including the enhancement of media literacy and the implementation of regulatory measures to distinguish between authentic public sentiment and manipulated narratives, emphasizing the importance of informed citizenship in combating misinformation.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Watson noted that media representation can shape the perceptions of the public and of policymakers on a range of different subjects, from refugees and asylum-seekers to conspiracy theories. He outlined key definitions, referring to security on multiple levels; national, human, cultural, and personal. When discussing mass media, Dr. Watson referred to both news and entertainment, and notes that the lines between these two mediums are becoming increasingly blurred in the modern age. This encompasses social media, which has an ability to influence narratives and affect various forms of security.

In examining the differences between traditional and social media, Dr. Watson noted that the ownership of social media is much more diffuse, thereby allowing higher levels of participation. However, social media users are not bound by the same journalistic norms and media ethics that traditional outlets are and, without these journalistic standards, social media can affect our understanding and perception of security issues in a different way compared to traditional media. Additionally, with social media content being curated by an algorithm instead of an editor, social media can create an echo-chamber where media biases can be reinforced. Although the cultural impact of these algorithms is not yet certain, Dr. Watson noted that these types of biases can undermine various types of security, from human to national.

Research about the framing effect suggests that media outlets can manipulate our perception of situations through the framing of the content they produce. Dr. Watson referenced multiple scholars' theories on the influence of media on public perception. For instance, Lazarsfeld and Bell conclude that people rely more on their lived experiences and personal networks to inform their ways of thinking. Chomsky and Gitlin, however, proposed that the content of media is shaped by who owns it, and with most of the mass media in the hands of a few conglomerates, these groups are able to dominate the messaging of the mass media. This domination profoundly shapes our understanding of the world through both the types of issues that get coverage and the types of issues that are ignored. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur argue that there is an interactive relationship between media and the audience. While certain forms of media may have the power to influence the way that people or policymakers think about a specific issue, they suggest that media outlets are also influenced on what types of events to cover by the preferences of their audience.

Mass media can produce insecurity in a variety of ways, including through creating false equivalencies, producing simplistic narratives, furthering the decline of societal trust and platforming foreign influence. In terms of presenting simplistic narratives, both traditional and social media rely on the oversimplification of stories, often influenced by limited audience attention span. These simplistic narratives can reduce the complexity of situations and create binaries. Dr. Watson identified media control and dominance as another source of insecurity, using the decline of local news outlets as an example. When the media environment is dominated by fewer actors, these actors become more easily able to control an overall narrative.

Foreign influence is likewise a risk within the media, particularly in the case of outlets that cater to immigrant or diaspora populations. Public and personal safety is also a security issue in the media; the surveillance and threats toward journalists and their sources can influence the types of content produced in the media. Conversely, certain media narratives have resulted in particular communities being targeted, for example Jewish people after the recent escalations in Gaza.

Dr. Watson stated that a major source of insecurity is the declining trust and epistemological fracture that can be caused by conspiracy theories. These theories can reduce trust in various levels of governance and undermine faith in traditional media. Whether intentional or not, these types of insecurities can create a declining trust in global institutions, including governments, NGOs, media organizations, and law enforcement professionals.

Question and Answer

How might we emphasize the complexity of events or issues covered in media when simplistic narratives are the preferred method of consumption for the younger generation?

The answer to this question lies in our schools and training students to seek out complexity when examining situations. Educational institutions have a crucial role in ensuring that students know about the tactics used by the media they are consuming and how these tactics can affect the general public. By nurturing a culture of curiosity, we can encourage young people to ask more questions about issues.

How can we discern the difference between free speech and authentic public sentiment on social media and foreign influence activities, particularly when it is difficult to ascertain who is behind the amplification of certain content?

This might be where government regulation in terms of identifying where certain things are produced could become a good idea. There are currently some nonprofit groups trying to help people understand where their media is coming from, but efforts like these will become more necessary as AI improves disinformation tactics. Additionally, informed citizens are imperative in fighting misinformation and disinformation.

Do you foresee the coverage of the upcoming US election differing from past elections? If so, in what ways?

We are already seeing differences in the way this election is playing out. Sources of information are becoming even more polarised and entangled. Dr. Watson noted that this election cycle, there is more willingness by some media outlets to embrace outright falsehoods without regard to repercussions.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Mass media—comprising both news and entertainment, including social media—plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and policymaker attitudes on various security levels, mainly national, human, cultural, and personal.
- The diffusion of media ownership, particularly in social media, allows for broader participation yet lacks the journalistic norms and ethics seen in traditional media. This absence leads to potentially skewed perceptions of security issues, reinforced by algorithm-driven content curation that may create echo chambers and amplify media biases.
- Various theories highlight the media's role in shaping our world understanding. While some argue media's limited influence, others, like Chomsky and Gitlin, stress how media ownership impacts content, suggesting a significant influence on public perception and the framing of issues.
- Mass media can produce insecurity, citing the spread of simplistic narratives, false equivalencies, the decline in societal trust, and the platforming of foreign influences as key factors. These elements contribute to a fractured epistemological landscape and diminished trust in global institutions.
- There is increased importance for education to promote critical engagement with media. Discerning authentic public sentiment from foreign-influenced content on

social media might necessitate regulatory and citizen-led efforts to identify the origins of media content, especially in the context of rapidly evolving AI-driven disinformation tactics.

FURTHER READING

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