33 PROBLEMS WITH MEDIA

VERSION 1.0

Most of society uses mass media and social platforms to communicate and stay informed.

Despite all the benefits we receive when information flows freely, there are a number of broken systems and negative externalities as well. Acknowledging these shortcomings is the first step to solving them. **Below, we identify 33 problems in the media ecosystem.**

Tabloidization

Enhanced focus on entertainment and the lives of celebrities, and more superficial coverage of current events.

Lurid coverage of the personal lives of public figures takes resources and attention away from more meaningful reporting.

Filter bubbles

Highly-personalized content feeds result in a lack of exposure to viewpoints that are outside a user's existing worldview.

Filter bubbles can cause people to develop an us-vs-them view of the world. The less familiar we are with others, the less empathy we tend to have for them.

Clickbait

A framing method that uses exaggerated language and omitted information to entice readers to click through or watch.

Upworthy was the quintessential purveyor of "You won't believe what happened next" headlines.

Surveillance capitalism
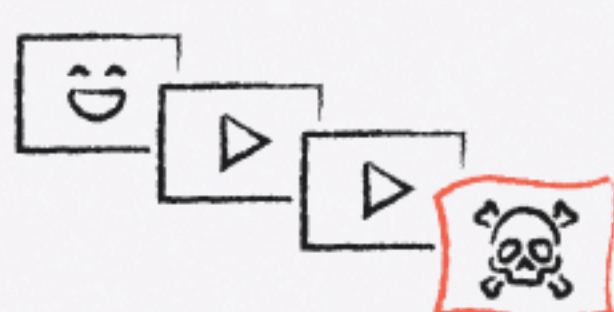
The capture and monetization of personal data.

Browser fingerprinting is one example of this activity. When you visit certain news sites, third-party vendors scan your device and browser settings to track you online. Most users are unaware this is happening.

Churnalism

When media outlets publish press releases and other forms of prepackaged content, instead of original reporting.

This helps outlets meet their content needs, but undermines trust as these messages are often optimized for public relations or promotional objectives.

Algorithmic radicalization

The hypothesis that recommendation engines can steer users towards increasingly extreme content on social platforms.

On platforms like TikTok which have fast feedback loops to train the algorithm, this can happen in a matter of hours.

Slacktivism

Publicly supporting political or social causes through low effort social media updates or online petitions.

Symbolic gestures like profile picture flair can feel like activism, but ultimately don't affect change in the real world.

Paywalls

A mechanism that prevents users from accessing specific content without a paid subscription.
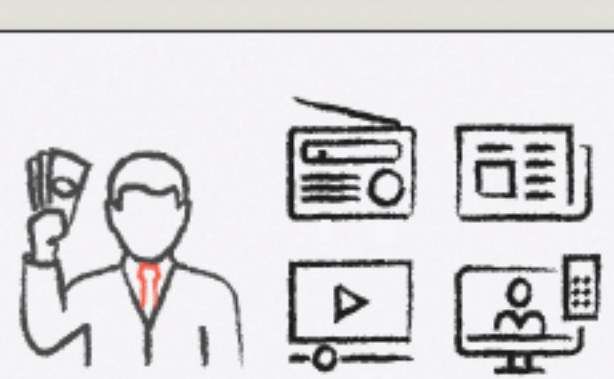
While media sites understandably want to drive revenue, the result is a two-tiered media landscape. Quality news for subscribers, and shallow, sensationalized content for everyone else.

News deserts

Communities that are no longer served by dedicated local news media.

Instead of receiving important local coverage in a person's own town, they hear about what Florida Man did today.

Media consolidation

Formerly independent outlets being bought up by larger media corporations, creating the illusion of choice.

Parent companies can distribute talking points across their entire network of outlets, creating a powerful conduit for propaganda and partisan messaging.

Social bots

Autonomous or human-run accounts on social media platforms that manipulate discussions and boost specific messages.
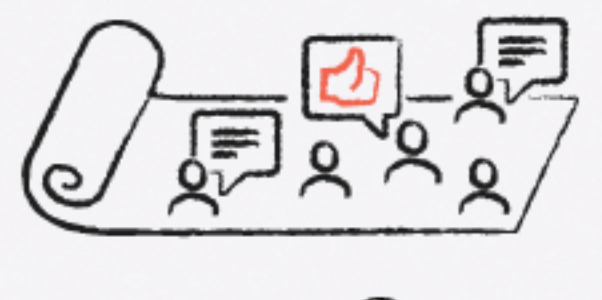
While @Name69420 accounts may seem obvious or harmless, they alter the tone of online discourse and artificially boost the spread of messages.

Ad clutter

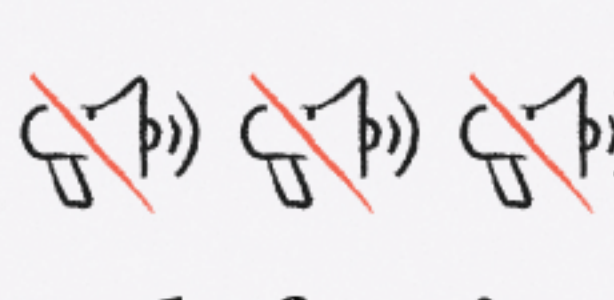When the usability of a news website is impacted by pop-ups, auto-play videos, and intrusive banner ads.

Display ads on their own are easy to ignore (and block), but when a plethora of ad types are deployed on a site, the resulting experience can be disorienting.

Astroturfing

Publishing content that creates the illusion of grassroots interest in a policy or individual.

One example of astroturfing would be op-eds from 'concerned citizens' prior to a police department's budget coming up for a vote.

Deplatforming

When individuals and communities are banned from social and publishing platforms.

Critics of deplatforming argue that rules are inconsistently enforced, and that banned conversations go to "the shadows" where communities become increasingly radicalized.

Context stripping

As stories are shared over social media channels, the most compelling, intuitive framing wins out. This digital "natural selection" strips layers of context away, warping how stories are perceived.

Example: An old clip of a rocket attack is shared out of context during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Without context, many assume it's a recent attack.

No fly zones

A form of implicit bias that sees topics or subjects excluded from critical coverage due to advertiser relationships.
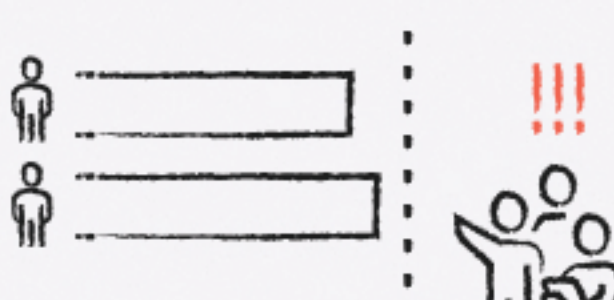
Example: Investigative reporters avoid the auto industry because car companies advertise heavily in their publication.

Infotainment

"News" that is optimized to hook viewers in by prioritizing entertainment value over factual reporting.

This style of reporting is driven, in part, by competition in the media space. It's not enough to simply deliver the news; it needs to be more compelling than other options.

Horse race journalism

A form of political coverage that emphasizes polling and the likelihood of victory over topics that are in the public interest.

When analysis focuses on minute details of the race itself, such as Candidate A having a 0.045% greater chance of winning Pawnee County today.

Good vs Evil

A form of oversimplification that fits people into villain-victim-hero frameworks, or frames complex conflicts as good versus evil.

This style of reporting strips away nuance, and dehumanizes people in the news cycle.

Rumor cascades

When a single social media post begins to spread in unbroken chains across a platform. This distribution pattern enables the viral spread of unvetted information.

On platforms like Twitter, a single spoof post can go viral and reach millions of people. This is how celebrity death rumors become trending topics.

Hit-and-run coverage

When news outlets publish a breaking story, and subsequently fail to follow up with additional facts, nuanced analysis, or broader context.
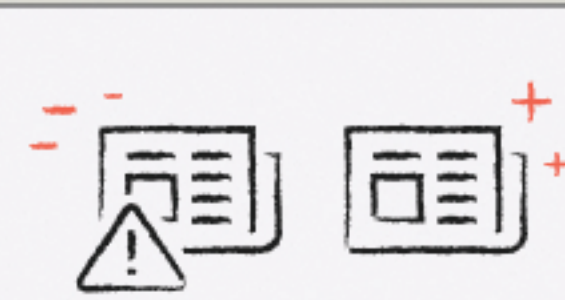
Example: The verdict in a celebrity trial is announced, and the previous day's story about a devastating earthquake in Yemen is promptly forgotten – even as the situation is still unfolding.

Dogpiling

A high volume of messages and/or targeted harassment for an infraction or opinion that the group does not agree with.
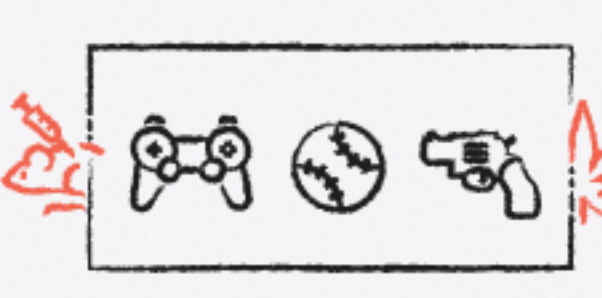
Example: Man expresses dislike for pineapple on pizza, and comes back online to 10,000 angry messages on Instagram.

Implied truth effect

Attaching warnings to specific pieces of content increases perceived accuracy of content without warnings.
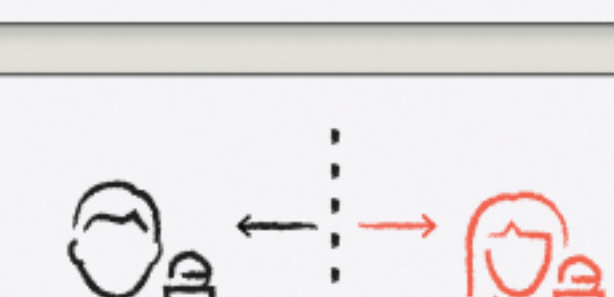
Research has found that warning tags help people identify false content, but also make them more likely to believe false stories that are untagged.

The Overton Window

Issues outside of a narrow window of "acceptable" mainstream discourse tend to not be discussed.

What is broadly acceptable and what is taboo in society is constantly evolving.

Explicit bias

When the attitudes and beliefs of publishers overtly dictate what stories are covered and how those stories are framed.

Certain news outlets will reliably only publish viewpoints from one side of the political spectrum.

Argument culture

Defaulting to an adversarial approach when encountering people with an opposing worldview.

Two examples of this in the real world are Twitter flame wars, and programs where hyperpartisan pundits argue.

Deviancy amplification spiral

A phenomenon defined by increasing reports of violent or antisocial behavior which grows into a moral panic.

The "Knockout Game" and "Tide Pod Challenge" are prototypical examples that captured headlines, despite few incidents actually occurring.

Sensationalism

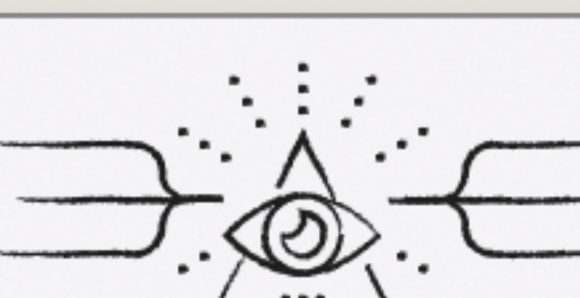The intentional use of provocative framing and exaggeration to attract more attention to stories.

"Shocking revelations from this month's Nonfarm Payroll report. What the Bureau of Labor Statistics doesn't want you to know!"

Cherrypicking

Using incomplete or out-of-context supporting evidence (e.g. data points, anecdotes, studies), while excluding opposing evidence.

Cherrypicking is problematic as the facts are often correct, so they make sense at face value. The problem is the lack of context.

Narrative fallacy

The tendency to take sequences of facts and infuse them with cause and effect explanations.
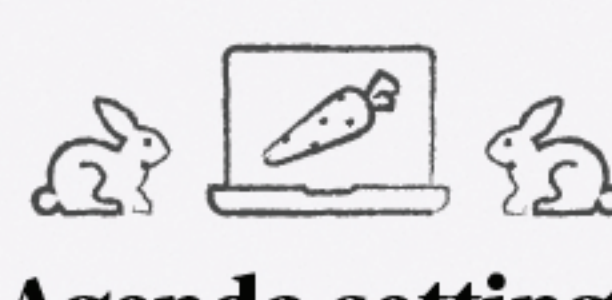
Conspiracy theories are an extreme form of "narrative fallacy". Every harmful or tragic event ties back to an overarching narrative.

False balance / Bothsidesism

Presenting two sides of an issue as if they are equally weighted when there is not corresponding proof to support both sides equally.

The media may elevate unsubstantiated ideas for the sake of argument and to avoid allegations of bias.

Agenda setting

A form of structural bias that sees mass media and influencers direct public discourse by assigning importance on select topics.

If the group setting the agenda lacks diversity or has conflicts of interest, then coverage won't reflect the priorities of society.

Let us know what you think.
100 million brains are better than one. Did we miss anything? Can a concept be explained more clearly? Let us know. Media literacy is a group effort.

For sources and further reading, visit: visualcapitalist.com/problems-with-media

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