

Bytes: What's new in tech

Google buries the (fake) lede

Google isn't planning to rid its search results of fake news, "but it's trying to purge it from the top," said Mark Bergen in *Bloomberg.com*. The company is "making a rare, sweeping change" to the algorithm that powers its ubiquitous search engine. Google's 10,000-plus staff of "raters," who are responsible for assessing search results, will now flag web pages hosting hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and other items the company has dubbed "low-quality content." Articles that are found to be "misleading, false, or offensive" will be demoted in search results, so they won't be among the first a user sees. Last month, for example, searches for "is Obama planning a coup" returned "a blatantly wrong article" as the top result; that item will now be buried further down.

Bytes: What's new in tech

Undetectable fake reviews

Fake reviews written by artificial intelligence could be a "major threat" to sites like Yelp and Amazon, said Rob Price in *Business Insider.com*. Researchers from the University of Chicago have developed AI-powered software capable of writing "extremely believable" online reviews that are virtually indistinguishable from human-authored ones. Sample fake reviews were created via a neural network trained using thousands of real online reviews, and contained specific recommendations and believable backstories ("I went with my brother and we had the vegetarian pasta and it was delicious.") The research team said their experiment shows that a site like Yelp, which "sells itself on the reliability and helpfulness of its reviews," is uniquely vulnerable to AI-generated evaluations, which could undermine public trust in online reviews and news.

Social media eats the news

Jeffrey Herbst
The Wall Street Journal

Silicon Valley giants like Facebook, Apple, and Google "are working hard to become the dominant distributors of news," said Jeffrey Herbst. Four in 10 American adults get news from Facebook; among Millennials, the figure is much higher. Recognizing there is money to be made from such reach, tech companies are encouraging media outlets to publish stories directly on their platforms. In return, news publications get a cut of the ad revenue. For media outlets struggling to monetize in the digital age, it seems like a winning strategy, but the shift has profound consequences. Depending on what Facebook's algorithms believe is best for each reader, "two people

with very similar interests may get different news." Tech companies insist they remain just "pipes" for delivering content, but their technology exhibits an increasing amount of editorial control, filtering out offensive content like pornography or hate speech. This kind of curation may seem "eminently sensible and responsible," but it's hardly neutral; Facebook's management, for instance, recently made a decision to ban private sales of guns on the social network. Going forward, tech firms will have to decide how to balance their profit motive "with their role as providers of information." Their choices will have a profound effect "on the quality of our democracy."

THE WEEK April 29, 2016

Viewpoint

"The glory of the internet is that it allows like-minded people to find one another. And the horror of the internet is that it allows like-minded people to find one another. Coin collectors, baseball-card enthusiasts, and used-book readers have all benefited from the opportunities offered by online connection. So have neo-Nazis, child-pornographers, and Communist agitators. The forces of anger now have instantaneous links. And that instantaneity allows a radicalizing more rapid than the world has ever seen." *Joseph Bottum in The Weekly Standard*