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Project launched to combat spread of COVID-19 fake news

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change, incubated by the Allan Gray Centre for Values-Based Leadership at the University of Cape Town (UCT) Graduate School of Business, has launched a six-month project that will use social media analytics and advocacy to combat the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus (COVID-19) in South Africa and beyond.

The project will be spearheaded by Associate Professor Camaren Peter and Stuart Jones, who have experience in tracking the viral spread of information. Now, just two months after launching the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change, they and their team are embarking on a project to combat the spread of fake news.

Over the next six months, the team of 26 – among them psychologists, criminologists and sustainability experts – plan to use social media analytics to track and counter the spread of fake news and polarising rhetoric about COVID-19 in South Africa and other parts of Africa, as well as monitor related incidences of social unrest and collective violence. These findings will be publicly available as well as shared with government in the form of daily, weekly and thematic reports.

The team is also working on a predictive model that will help to identify likely hotspots of collective violence in the coming months. They hope to encourage healthy online dialogue by empowering and amplifying the voices of active citizens whose values align with the centre's aims of encouraging tolerance and social cohesion.

Peter met Jones in 2017 after he noted with concern how quickly disinformation campaigns (such as the one orchestrated by Bell Pottinger) spread fake news online. This spurred Peter to formally establish the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change as a non-profit organisation.

The core mission of the centre is to build healthy online communities by countering online polarisation, divisive rhetoric and narrative manipulation. As Peter explains, the online realm is currently flooded with examples of such fake news related to COVID-19. "For example: on the first day of lockdown there was a fake document that did the rounds that claimed

that the government would only provide financial aid for South African businesses, which turned out to be a deliberate attempt to sow division,” he says.

“To date the government has been doing a good job of countering fake news, but it has quickly become clear that the major issues coming to the fore are ones of social fracture around lockdown and perceptions of privilege versus poverty in what lockdown means to different economic classes in South Africa.”

When it comes to the advocacy and activism component of the centre’s work, Jones explains that the research methodologies they use can identify both the protagonists and antagonists participating in debates online. “We will be identifying protagonists who are value-aligned with us and offering to stand beside them in the work they are already doing. We want to amplify those voices as a way of encouraging healthy dialogue, even amongst people who may disagree.”

But this is just one part of a much broader vision, according to Peter. “We recognise that the issue of mis- and disinformation and fake news is a global problem being driven by both internal and external actors who are exerting asymmetric power over the politics of different countries. As a non-profit organisation, our long-term goal is to bring about healthy conversations in the online realm so that we can have healthier politics in real life. We want to create platforms for people to organise around and methodologies that can be used for analysis. We also want to make this all open source and share it with similar groups around the world so that they can open centres in their own political spheres.”

“Our big hairy audacious goal is to help create a global network of engaged citizens who are actively resisting divisive influences.”

Jones believes COVID-19 crisis may lead to both beneficial and destructive narratives. “Whatever the case, we want to be right there analysing and reporting on them and encouraging active citizens on social media to participate in the generation of these narratives so that something positive comes out of this. I think there is the opportunity in this current crisis to bring people together or push them further away. The hope is that this will bring humanity together, which means we would also be better poised to deal with other global problems, such as climate change.”

ENDS

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