



Scripturient

Information disorder

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“We are an evidence-based institution built on truth, on data and evidence. Anything that destabilises that and destabilises evidence-based institutions is a threat to our democracy but also a threat to the wellbeing of the public.” – Anna-Maria Arabia.

AFTER three full days at this year’s Cambridge Disinformation Summit, the long flight home to Canberra gave the head of the Australian Academy of Science a chance to reflect.

The revelation for Anna-Maria Arabia was that, contrary to discussions at home, nobody at the summit was talking about misinformation: “it was almost too small to worry about”. As a threat to democracy and public welfare, the amplification of false information through ignorance paled in comparison to deliberate and systemic efforts to dismantle the truth.

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This time, summit participants weren’t concerned about “the kid who is trying to monetise YouTube, it wasn’t even Cambridge Analytica and nation states and their role in disinformation”, says Arabia. It was disinformation being “proactively used as a tool at national level, at institutional level, by individuals, including by non-malicious actors”.

Those actors include businesses using disinformation to discredit their competitors. “I think about that in the context of young entrepreneurs and people who have great new ideas that might disrupt industries. It’s very easy to discredit a young entrepreneur or someone who disrupts an industry when that industry is large enough. That stops progress.”

In her own role Anna-Maria has seen up close the impact of discreditation of climate scientists “who are not just challenged but assaulted through online abuse to the point of being unable to continue their research”, and whose families are directly affected. These damaging attacks are a disincentive for other scientists and researchers to speak publicly.

So prevalent is the practice of discreditation that a whole new profession has been spawned: consultants and analysts contracted to find the sources of disinformation affecting their clients. Even these experts can’t prevent it from happening in the first place. Their plea to summit participants in government, media, business and academia was to work together to find a preventive solution.

To explain part of the problem, Anna-Maria points to *The Death of Truth* by Steven Brill (“I really need to read some light fiction!”). The so-called ‘Good Samaritan clause’ [Section 230] in United States law effectively gives social media platforms exemption from responsibility for the content their algorithms disseminate. Any attempt to introduce regulation is hijacked by debates on freedom of speech. But an underlying

issue, she says, is “massive inequity in society. People feeling disenfranchised, feeling voiceless, feeling like agendas that don’t serve them well have overtaken them, feeling left behind by technological advantage and progress.

“Which took me all the way back to the role of science and knowledge. How do we make sure we don’t make people feel left behind in a technologically advanced world and one that’s moving at a pace that rivals the great revolutions of history.”

One summit speaker forecast the introduction of a quarantined part of the internet where information could be verified by content credentials, not dissimilar to the digital certificates currently in use for websites: “online information that is verified and known to be from reliable sources is tagged, and if it is manipulated, it shows up through the tagging process”.

Alongside such practical solutions, says Anna-Maria, the research and information sectors must be stronger in resisting attack. Ultimately that means being less fragmented and less polite.

“The sector rightly asks itself ‘how can we improve ourselves, how can we make sure our research is transparent and openly accessible, how do we maintain the trust of society in science and in evidence-based institutions?’,” she explains. “We should always be on top of our game and striving for excellence, unquestionably, but we shouldn’t be lectured to by those who deliberately discredit science and institutions for their own personal gain, for private commercial gain, when the very people who seed doubt in science are not held to the same standard. Stop. It’s not OK. It’s not on.” **IP**



Links

Cambridge Disinformation Summit program, see www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/events/cambridge-disinformation-summit-2025/
Australian Academy of Science, see www.science.org.au/