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Improving Informational Health in Washington | UW Professor Jevin West

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W CENTER FOR AN INFORMED PUBLIC
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Human communication can be challenging, even in settings that are in-person, non-distractive, and with people we know well. What did she mean by 'interesting clothing'? Why did he pause so long on the last question? Throw in digital distance, distraction, and divergent perspectives—collateral effects of social media and algorithmically curated content—and no wonder the world sometimes feels like a white noise machine.

I am a researcher at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public (CIP). I study how and why rumors spread online. They often spread during times of uncertainty and anxiety, something we saw during the pandemic and we will see during the upcoming U.S. election. The challenge, however, is not just contending with the rumor itself. Today we contend with infinite bots, inauthentic accounts, and now generative AI and deepfakes, making it even more challenging to tell what is true and what is false. Add to that low levels of trust in government, civic deserts, news deserts, increased political polarization, and epidemic-levels of loneliness and isolation and the challenge almost seems insurmountable.

As Washingtonians, what can we do?

(1) We can write policy. In our work at the CIP, we've assisted state lawmakers draft legislation, now law, that requires the disclosure of "deepfakes" when they're used in election-related media. But more can be done, of course. (2) We can develop technology. In our work, we are collaborating and advising groups detecting deepfakes. Again, more can be done. (3) And, most importantly, we can educate. Through partnerships across the state, we are developing curricula and programs to further develop skills at navigating our ever-changing information environments. This is being done in schools, libraries, and community centers across the state, while inspiring other states to do the same.

MisinfoDay 2023 (Courtesy of UW Center for an Informed Public)

Event at the Sedro-Woolley Community Center (Courtesy of UW Information School)

One of my favorite programs, inspired by our annual MisinfoDay program—a collaboration between the University of Washington and Washington State University—is led by high school students, their teachers, and librarians. After spending a semester learning about things like deepfakes, rumoring, confirmation bias, etc., the students then translate these learnings to their grandparents, parents, and neighbors. More of these in-person, intergenerational learning events are popping up across Washington in both rural and urban communities. At one such event in Skagit County, Sedro-Woolley High School students taught local senior citizens some of the media and digital literacy lessons they've been learning in the classroom. Later, the local seniors shared lessons and skills from their lives, creating an exciting intergenerational exchange of knowledge, perspectives, and histories.

I spend my professional days and nights in the darker corners of the internet. Few things inspire me more than events like the one in Sedro-Woolley. The magic, though, is something that has been around far before the internet, social media, and ChatGPT. It arises from the simple act of respectful, in-person engagement in one's community. Whatever we can do to increase and

encourage this in public settings such as libraries, schools, and community event spaces will hopefully lead to improved informational health, less noise, and real connections.

Jevin West is the co-founder of the new Center for an Informed Public at UW aimed at resisting strategic misinformation, promoting an informed society and strengthening democratic discourse. His research and teaching focus on the impact of data and technology on science and society, with a focus on slowing the spread of misinformation. He is the co-author of the new book, Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World, which helps non-experts question numbers, data, and statistics without an advanced degree in data science.

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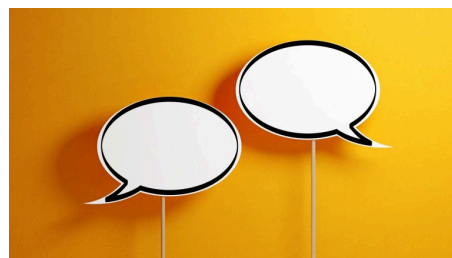
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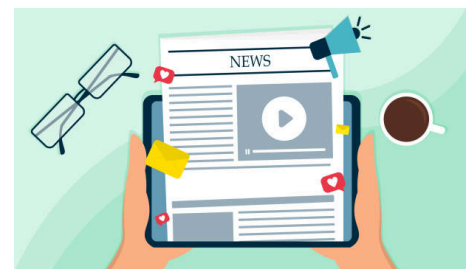
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