



Stories Beneath the Shell

NEWS

Expert Kate Starbird discusses how misinformation spreads during crises

By Teresa Johnson



Professor Kate Starbird discusses how she collected data to show the amount of false information spread through social media. Photo by Teresa Johnson

From events spread through the media following Hurricane Harvey, the Boston Marathon bombing and the Parkland shooting, University of Washington assistant professor Kate Starbird shared examples with students and faculty on April 9 that showed how false information creates “alternative narratives” of crisis events.

Every year this university’s College Park Scholars program hosts events associated with a theme. This year’s theme is “Going Viral.”

Marilee Lindemann, executive director of College Park Scholars, said that the theme came about because the Scholars program is involved with a flu study conducted by Donald Milton from the School of Public Health.

“We decided to choose Going Viral as our theme and we wanted to expand it because our annual themes are aimed at creating conversation across all 12 of our Scholars programs,” Lindemann said. “So we wanted information as well as imagery as well as illness.”

Lindemann said she found out about Starbird after stumbling across her work while browsing social media and wanted to allow her to share her scholarly expertise with students and faculty about relevant issues.

Starbird talked to students and faculty about the way information is obscured through media.

She reviewed concepts such as fake news, media manipulation, political propaganda and “deepfakes”—manipulations of video and audio to take information out of context.

Starbird said that fake news is redirected at mainstream media like The New York Times, ABC and CNN, aiming to “delegitimize journalism” and “equate journalism with this kind of fake news and decrease our trust in the information that we’re seeing.”

She said that vulnerability in disinformation and political propaganda can be spread very quickly through social media and the cascade of information can obscure the original context, especially through visual images.

“As information spreads, it’s difficult to identify its original source and therefore it can be really hard to judge the credibility of an online source,” Starbird said.

Starbird said that sites like Facebook use computer algorithms to show a person different things, depending on what the algorithm thinks someone may like.

Bryanna Nketia, freshman public health science major, wasn’t aware that Facebook automatically changed what appeared on someone’s timeline based on interest alone.

“If you like more [politically] left-leaning things or more right-leaning things [it] modifies what appears for you, so I guess that feeds into people’s confirmation bias until they’re challenged about what they think or what they see,” Nketia said.

In becoming better consumers of information and practicing information engagement, Starbird said that it’s important for people to be aware of their own cognitive biases within confirmation bias and motivated reasoning.

"If it's too good to be true, it probably isn't," Starbird said. "We are all targets of disinformation, it's meant to erode trust in democracy and divide us."

Starbird said that internet trolls can also pretend to be opposite sides of an argument and spread through the media only with the intention of attracting attention and stirring up emotions to create a reaction.

In response to how media can affect a person through emotional manipulation, Kaley Beins, graduate assistant for the Global Public Health Scholars program, commented on how college students are affected.

"The current political climate is already emotionally disturbing for many students," Beins said. "The fact that disinformation on both sides of the political spectrum is purposefully designed to appeal to our emotions, especially our disgust and anger, makes it extraordinarily difficult to process and react productively."

"I worry about my students, and honestly about myself, becoming desensitized as a result of the emotionally charged disinformation," Beins said.

During the talk, Starbird incorporated events that young adults in the audience were familiar with, as disinformation is often consumed through Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and other social media sites.

"It affects students so much because they are the so-called digital natives, this is where they live and breathe and I think it's a real challenge to them as citizens and students and human beings to be really mindful and aware and critical in their approach to information," Lindemann said.

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