Hypertext, Social Media, and Civic Engagement

How Hypertext is Ruining the World, and Might Just Save It

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ABSTRACT

The world is facing massive problems that no single nation can solve. Global warming, COVID-19, abject poverty, endless wars, widening inequality, religious extremism, racial discrimination, white supremacy, and mental health crises are enormous threats to human flourishing and even human survival. These problems require coordinated efforts on a global scale that, thus far, the nations of the world have rarely managed to mount. Essential to societies addressing these problems is the ability to agree on facts, to view science as authoritative, and to engage in vigorous constructive dialog about possible solutions to these problems without vilifying those of differing opinion. Unfortunately, as these difficult problems have grown more insurmountable, so too has the polarization separating people on opposing sides, especially in the U.S. Just as these problems threaten to overtake us, we seem less capable of devising solutions and coordinating efforts to combat them.

Today, social media is inundated in rhetoric about these issues, but this rhetoric is rarely constructive. Social media platforms encourage viral outrage as they reinforce polarized views that monetize hyperlinks as targeted advertisements. Bombastic "debates" thrive on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Discord, and other platforms, but rarely change anyone's mind. President Trump has almost 90 million followers on Twitter, a platform he has used throughout his presidency to communicate directly to his followers, but his tweets have only exacerbated polarization, promulgated fake news, promoted extremism, and contributed to the rejection of shared truths.

Hypertext and hyperlinks are *the* key features of social media platforms that connect users to online information, but too often this "information" is misinformation, disinformation, fake news, propaganda, or conspiracy theory used as "proof" for specious claims. People share articles without verifying them and often without even reading them. Our divisive discourse becomes more polarizing and self-affirming, putting solutions to major problems further out of reach.

But just as hyperlinked social media subverts our discourse, it also has the power to connect us to the truth, to facts, to debunked conspiracy theories, and to a diversity of ideas. Social media platforms have begun to flag questionable claims and hyperlink us to facts. Novel user interfaces can aid in our ability to separate fact from fiction and engage in healthy online discourse. Douglas Engelbart's pioneering hypertext design boosted individual human capability; so, too, can hyperlinked social media boost our collective civic capabilities. In this keynote, I will characterize the challenges we face and show examples of how we can promote truth, facts, empathy, trust, and constructive dialog in online spaces, so that we can solve our world's greatest problems.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Collaborative and social computing → Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms → Social media

KEYWORDS

Hypertext, social media, civic engagement, misinformation, disinformation, politics, polarization, fake news, user interfaces.

BIOGRAPHY

Jacob O. Wobbrock is a Professor of human-computer interaction (HCI) in The Information School and, by courtesy, in the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering at the University of Washington. He directs the ACE Lab and is founding co-director of the CREATE research center. Professor Wobbrock's research seeks to scientifically understand people's experiences of computers and information, and to improve those experiences by inventing new interactive technologies. For the past five years, he has been studying Web credibility and users' perceptions of online news.

Professor Wobbrock has co-authored over 180 peer-reviewed publications and has received 25 paper awards. For his contributions to accessible computing, he received the 2017 SIGCHI Social Impact Award and the 2019 SIGACCESS ASSETS Paper Impact Award, a 10-year lasting impact award. In 2019, he was inducted into the prestigious CHI Academy.

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