

BROADCAST SCRIPT- Developing an app to alert health care pros to misinformation on social media

When Twitter, under new owner Elon Musk decided to stop banning misinformation, researchers already working to combat the influence of bad information on social media knew the stakes just got higher.

Kevin Leicht, a professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and the Chicago-based Discovery Partners Institute science team lead knew the work he and others are doing is going to serve an important role to help health professionals identify misinformation or flat out deliberate lies.

Leicht is the co-lead researcher for project to develop a software application to create real-time alerts to bad health-related information trending on social media. It recently received an additional \$100,000 in Jump ARCHES funding – through a joint collaboration with OSF HealthCare, UIUC, and the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Peoria.

What's currently available are only websites like snopes.com or factcheck.org. Leicht and others on the project were surprised there was nothing else but once the work began, he understood why.

"If this were easy, somebody would have done it already," he says, laughing. "We were both surprised nobody tried to have done it. And then when we got into it. 'Wow, it's really difficult.'" (:12)

Leicht and his colleagues are using data, artificial intelligence and other approaches to automate the effort to identify inaccurate health information.

"What our project actually does is take not only the pre-existing fact-checked data and query it all in one place, it brings it forward in a user-friendly fashion. But then it's also trying to come up with a way of adding to this data in a way that's faster than having a human fact checker just scan the web all the time, looking for what the new piece of misinformation is." (:26)

Leicht says it's been more challenging than he anticipated. Researchers have found there's no getting away from content moderators.

"Having humans curate that a little bit ... you have content experts that look at that and say, 'Is this dangerous or is it not? Is this trending, is it not?' And then figuring out a way to deliver that to the final customer in a way that requires as little inner interface by them as we can possibly get away with." (:17)

Co-research lead Dr. Mary Stapel, of OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center and assistant program director for combined Internal Medicine-Pediatrics at University of Illinois College of Medicine, Peoria (UICOMP) says the alerts could allow organizations to stop bad information from going viral.

"If we can even get ahead of that – know what information is circulating and start feeding out more accurate information ahead of time through our community partners; that really could be a game changer when we're thinking about things like pandemics and infectious disease." (:21)

During the height of the pandemic, Dr. Stapel says she realized misinformation can impact anyone.

“There was an interesting turn during the pandemic, where after education – large-scale campaigns and initiatives were put out around vaccination; there actually was sort of a flip to where communities of color, lower socio-economic communities were more vaccinated than upper class, more predominantly white communities so I really think it is across the spectrum.” (:31)

Leicht and Dr. Stapel look forward to a time when the software can be available to health care pros, and eventually to everyone through an interface with patient portals such as MyChart. Currently, Leicht predicts the initial software rollout for medical personnel could be available in two years.