

MEDIATION



Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hirondelle

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE



Reaching the widest audience

For Fondation Hirondelle and its media, social networks represent an opportunity that cannot be ignored to diversify the channels of access to our information and programmes. The World Bank and International Telecommunication Union estimate that in 2025, 77% of the world's population will be regularly connected to social media and the Internet (compared with about half in 2019). We nevertheless work in countries which will probably remain among the least connected.

Whereas these tools for communication promised to bring more democracy and equality, they bring de facto a digital divide, i.e. a gap between the people who are connected and those who are only slightly connected or not at all. This gap accentuates the divisions but also inequalities, to the disadvantage of people who are less wealthy, less educated, living in rural areas. Women in particular have less access to these technologies. In addition, consuming information through social media accentuates the "amongst ourselves" phenomenon and restricts openness to other points of view.

Like any media organization, we therefore need to remain attentive to the technological means of our target audiences and use all the platforms available (audio, video, text) to continue reaching the largest number of people, without discrimination.

Caroline Vuillemin
General Director

A demonstration in front of the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on April 10, 2018, to call attention to the use of fake accounts on Facebook. © Saul Loeb / AFP

INFORMING IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In a little over a decade, social networks have become a global vector for the dissemination of information, but they often also propagate erroneous or hateful messages. How can news media differentiate themselves?

Online social media, which appeared in the mid-2000s and were first a space for exchanging personal news among the Western middle class, became a global media phenomenon about 10 years ago: 58% of the world's people aged over 13 now use at least one social network. In the countries where news and information constitute a market, 36% of users of Facebook, the biggest social network with 2.3 billion accounts worldwide, consult their account for information purposes. In emerging countries facing new forms of censorship, such as Brazil or Turkey, the Whatsapp mobile phone application - owned by Facebook - is increasingly being used by groups of several thousand people to share information on topics of common

interest. The success of these platforms is largely due to the democratization of the media that they bring: everyone can produce and disseminate information, without going through the filter of a recognized media or institution.

But the years 2016 to 2018 raised a global mistrust of social networks related to the political and social consequences of their massive use for misinformation purposes. One case stood out: Cambridge Analytica and the way it used Facebook to promote Brexit and then the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. In Myanmar, the army is accused of creating hundreds of Facebook pages to spread hatred of the Muslim Rohingya minority, several thousand of whom were massacred and more than 700,000 forced to flee to Bangladesh in a process that the UN Human Rights Council has described as genocide.

When questioned on these issues by the public and by governments, the companies that own these social networks propose technical self-regulation measures on algorithms, or editorial measures on publication rules. These measures remain unclear, and have difficulty convincing people of their good faith and effectiveness. Nor do governments dare to legally restrict too much these platforms, which are popular and a source of economic development. In this context, how can news media stand out on social networks? ■

Interview



THE COMPLEX FABRIC OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Young people watch videos on the app TikTok on their mobile phones in Mumbai, India, on November 10, 2019. © Indranil Mukherjee / AFP

© DR



How are information and misinformation disseminated through digital social networks? Jens Koed Madsen, researcher at the Complex Human-Environmental Systems Simulation Laboratory (CoHESyS) at Oxford University explains the main biases induced by users and algorithms.

59% of people worldwide say that it is getting harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organization. Would you say that widespread use of social networks in the last 10 years has introduced confusion in what can be considered trustworthy information?

Jens Koed Madsen: Digital social networks are increasingly becoming a significant source of news and information for most citizens. This has fundamentally changed our information structures, as classic news outlets have editorial oversight. In other words, we have gone from top-down mass media to a landscape of top-down and bottom-up information sharing.

This has significant advantages, as it democratizes who can participate in public discourse, enables citizens to speak out against powerful social entities or persons, and makes it easier to expose wrongdoings (e.g. social media gave #MeToo more impact and reach). However, it also has serious disadvantages: it is easy to generate false or misleading accounts, it clouds accountability (it is difficult to know where a rumour or a piece of misinformation starts).

Given the ease of invention of fake accounts and disinformation, it is no wonder that many people find it increasingly difficult to know what is credible or not. As these systems are bottom-up, we need to understand how information can travel in order to design the social networks in ways that protect citizens from deliberate misinformation while retaining their freedom of expression.

How do social networks “work” psychologically? Can you give some examples of mental bias they may foster?

Psychology has identified numerous biases that are related to how we seek out and process the information we get on social networks. In particular, confirmation bias and the continued influence effect are relevant to acknowledge. Confirmation bias is the penchant to search for, interpret, and recall information in ways that confirm what that person already believes. Clearly, as the amount of data rises in social networks, it

becomes easier for all citizens to identify information that confirms their prior beliefs. The continued influence effect shows that information initially presented as true continues to influence people’s beliefs even when they see corrections they deem to be clear and credible. That is, even when the misinformation is corrected, it can continue to do damage. People who wish to disseminate misinformation on social networks can exploit biases.

In addition to personal biases, the structure of the network influences the dissemination of correct and incorrect information. Networks are dynamic systems where people follow and un-follow each other and where underlying algorithms promote or suppress content. Users depend on how it is designed by the company in question. For example, a company may decide to promote polarising statements (if they elicit more user activity), which in turn may contribute to polarisation and dissemination of misinformation. In a study, we have shown that echo chambers can arise as a

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consequence of the structure of the network even in conditions where people have no biases.

We have to understand the psychology of citizens, the structure of the network, and how people engage with each other on these platforms, as all of these influence how misinformation can spread and be maintained. It is not enough to just understand user biases, as this puts undue weight on the users and ignores the role of system design and interactivity.

If you were a media editor, how would you use social networks in order for your media to be acknowledged as a trustworthy source of information ?

As information systems have become bottom-up, the number of people who produce content has increased. This puts pressure on media outlets, as they risk being equivocated with any other entities that provide opinions or news, such as individual citizens, bots, and politicians. In order to become credible on social networks, media need to set themselves apart from opinionated or misleading contributors.

In addition to personal biases, the structure of the network influences the dissemination of correct and incorrect information

As many opinions and claims on social networks are unsubstantiated or simply revolve around claims with little to no backing, news media can differ in the source material: they can highlight and identify sources behind claims or statements, they can make clear the evidential reasoning that leads to a specific conclusion or claim, and they can interrogate hearsay or conjecture. By providing thorough critical journalism and source material, news media can set their content apart and substantiate their claims. Furthermore, it might be prudent to stop reporting what is trending on social media, as this equivocates reports from that media outlet with Twitter chatter.

Do you think social networks should be more regulated? If so, what should be done to prevent their use in disseminating misinformation ?

Any country with libel laws, consumer protection agencies, or punishment of hate-speech or verbal threats imposes societally agreed restrictions on what can and cannot be said. Given increasingly complex information systems where everyone can participate (including malevolent actors), it is paramount that

we consider how speech can be (or should be) regulated on social networks. In particular, regulatory frameworks should seek to limit the deliberate dissemination of misinformation without punishing citizens for accidentally doing so. This will involve citizens, journalists, regulators, and network providers.

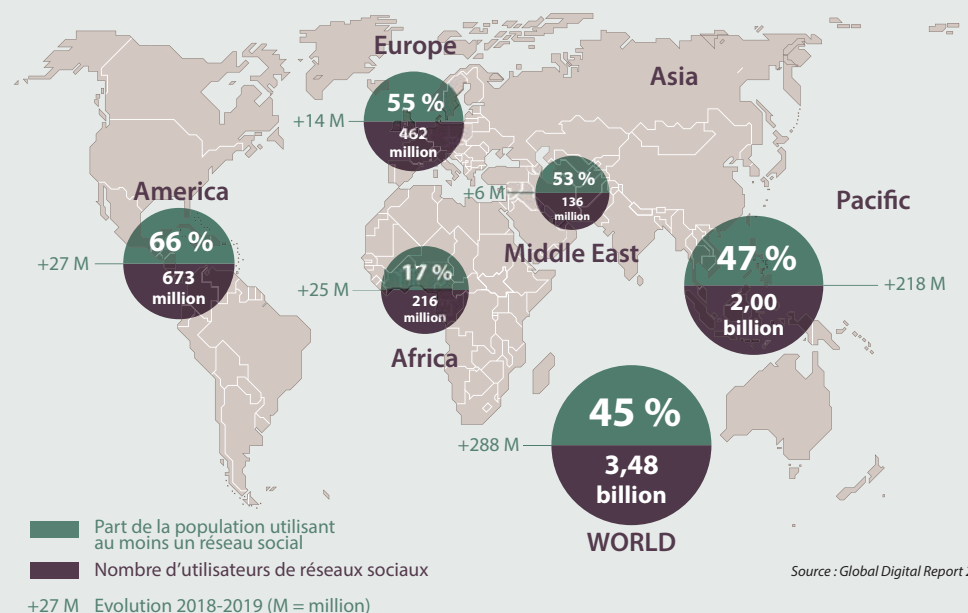
These interventions can come in the form of fact checking, warning labels, algorithmic promotion of trusted news outlets, and so forth. However, critically we don't know how ordinary citizens, purveyors of misinformation and network providers will adapt to regulatory

interventions. For example, will citizens switch to competing social networks if a network decides to impose communal standards and norms? Until we understand the complex fabric of bottom-up communication on social networks, solutions from politicians, media people, pundits and social network providers will be inadequate. ■

Timid regulation

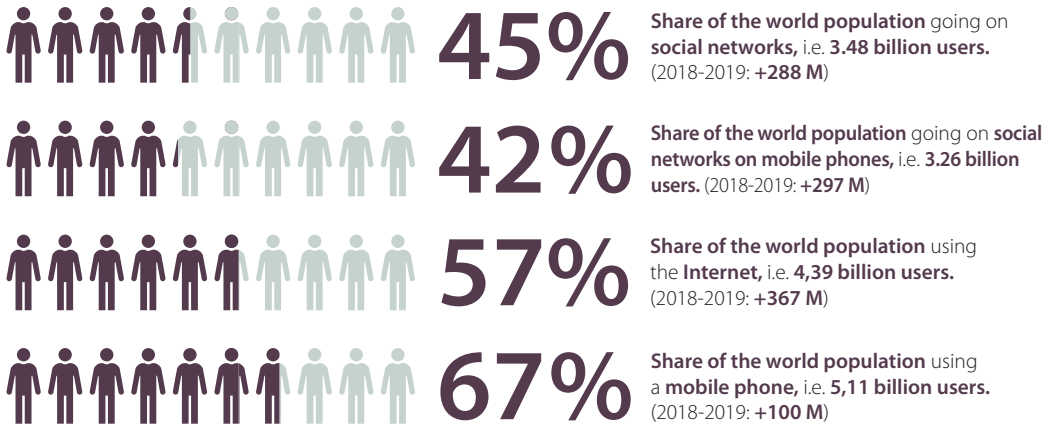
Given the massive use of social networks for misinformation, political propaganda or religious hatred, companies that own them have been called upon by parliaments to explain their rules of publication, their algorithms and how they manage users' personal data. In July 2017, Germany adopted laws requiring social networks to remove certain content - religious hatred, terrorist propaganda, child pornography, false information - within 24 hours of it being reported, and France did the same two years later. Faced with criticism and attempts at legal constraint by governments, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg published an opinion piece in March 2019 in which he called for greater collaboration between governments and digital companies to achieve better regulation. The Swiss government is part of this collaborative approach with its Swiss Digital Initiative, bringing together scientists, digital professionals and public stakeholders. It intends to mobilize International Geneva to sign a new "Geneva Convention" to define and implement "ethical standards of the digital age", in the words of Brad Smith, President of Microsoft and a stakeholder in the project. As for algorithms and the management of personal data, which fuel the economic engine of social networks, no country has so far committed itself to regulating them more than is provided for in the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Uneven spread of social media users in the world (2019)



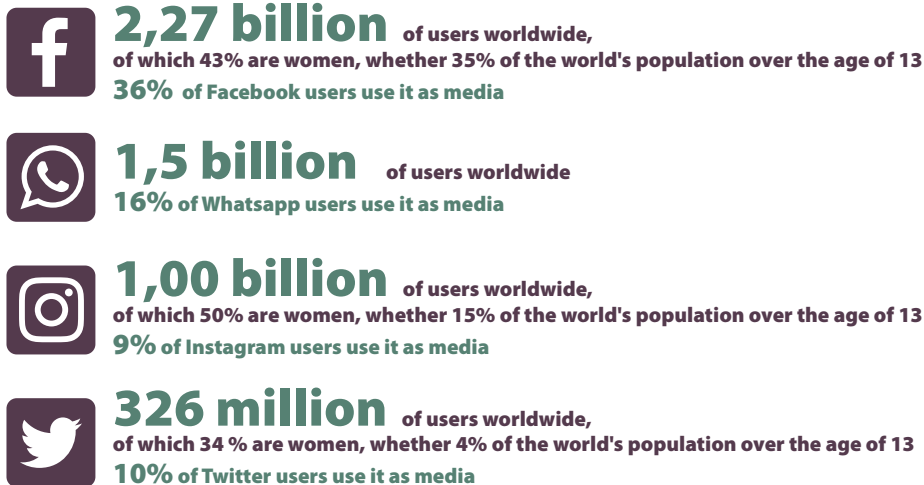
Big Data

A widely connected world



Source : Global Digital Report 2019

Main information-sharing social media and mobile applications



Sources : Global Digital Report 2019, Reuters Digital News Report 2019

Low Internet user trust in information quality of social networks



Sources : Global Digital Report 2019, Reuters Digital News Report 2019

Increasing use of social media worldwide



58% of the world's population over age 13 uses at least one social network



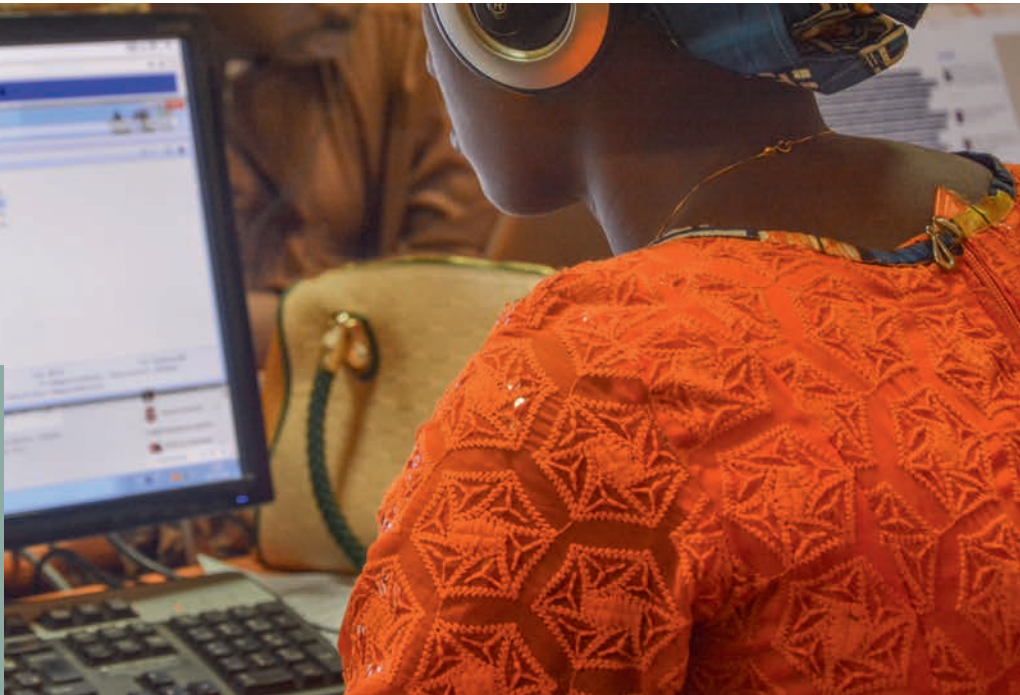
6h42 Average length of daily Internet use incl. 3h28 on computer or tablet and 3h14 on mobile telephone

2h16 Average length of daily social media use

8,9 Average number of social media accounts per Internet user

Our experience

USING SOCIAL MEDIA WITH JOURNALISTIC PRINCIPLES



A journalist from Studio Tamani, Fondation Hironnelle's news programme in Mali. © Fondation Hironnelle / Mamadou Ouattara

© DR



Nicolas Boissez, Head of Communication and External Relations for Fondation Hironnelle, explains the Foundation's policy with regard to posting and moderating on social media.

From its headquarters in Lausanne, Fondation Hironnelle is piloting 10 media on three continents. What is your policy with regard to publishing on social media?

Nicolas Boissez: Social networks allow us to communicate from our headquarters, at a relatively modest cost, about our work to audiences with which we want to develop interaction. They also enable our media projects in the field to raise their profile and disseminate their information more widely, particularly to audiences who are abandoning traditional media. This dual use, institutional and media, requires us to define principles and share them with our teams (which social networks to use, to reach which audiences, which content to share, how often, which moderation character, etc.). This policy is the subject of discus-

sions and training for our teams, particularly when new programmes are launched.

Fondation Hironnelle likes to address young people. Is that done through a specific presence on social media?

In most of the countries where we work, which are among the most fragile in the world, access to the Internet and social networks is limited to a small minority (less than 10% of the population in the DRC, CAR and Niger, for example). Traditional media, radio and television, remain by far the primary means of reaching most of the population, including young people, in many sub-Saharan African countries. But social networks are widely used by an active minority. To talk to the young urban people who rose up in Burkina Faso or the DRC, we must use social media as well as the traditional media that remain at the core of our services. It is also a way of getting our information to political leaders, opinion leaders and representatives of the international community on the ground.

Fondation Hironnelle works in contexts of conflict, but social networks are fertile ground for conflictual language. How do you deal with that risk?

Improving access to information and contributing to dialogue in societies in crisis are the two pillars of our action. However, it now appears that social networks may be more a vehicle for misinformation than for information. They encourage division and polarization of opinions, particularly through the "echo chambers" in which they confine us, rather than understanding each other, listening and dialogue. It is therefore paradoxical for us, as for all media and peace-building organizations, to have to use tools that are designed on principles opposed to ours. Our answer is simple: it is away from social media, on the airwaves, in the studio and through outside discussions, that we can initiate a real dialogue between conflicting parties and rebuild trust through our programmes. Our approach is based on solid principles, which have not changed with the emergence of Facebook or Twitter. They are those of journalism as it has been practised since the twentieth century. Our use of social networks therefore remains basic: our editorial staff share the information they have produced and broadcast in as factual and clear a manner as possible. Our media do not relay content that is not their own. Our moderators respond to comments and delete hate speech or insults. These simple journalistic principles are the best protection against any form of misuse. ■

It is away from social media that we can initiate a real dialogue between conflicting parties

Eyewitness

BUILDING RESPONSIBLE DIALOGUE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Gaël Hurlimann and Céline Pétremand, digital content editor and social media manager respectively at Swiss daily **Le Temps**, here explain their policies on publication and violence prevention on social media.

For a daily newspaper like Le Temps, what are the main challenges of publishing on social networks?

Gaël Hurlimann: The first challenge is to be present on social networks, so that this major space for information sharing is not left solely to controversial voices, and to build an audience with which we can have a responsible dialogue. We are present on five platforms: Facebook, by far the most important for us with more than 200,000 subscribers - representing 10% of the French-speaking Swiss population -, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. But Facebook is for us more of an exchange platform than an audience platform: it represents only 20% of the clicks recorded on our Letemps.ch website. Moreover, this audience is quite frivolous, difficult to transform into subscribers when our business model is essentially profit-oriented. As we are not economically dependent on this audience, we can maintain a quality relationship with them, largely devoid of seduction: we only publish internally produced content on social networks, in line with our duty to inform, and with headlines that are themselves faithful to the content of the articles. Ideally, we encourage constructive feedback, some of which - and this happens regularly - leads us to update our articles and thus improve the quality of the information we produce.

How do you build this quality of dialogue?

Céline Pétremand: All our content is posted by two Social Media Managers who work within the editorial team. They participate every morning in editorial meetings and are able to prepare with journalists the posts and responses to comments. We realized that when a posted article generates controversy, it is important to intervene very early, within two hours maximum after publication. Three levels of response are possible: the journalist provides a suggested response to the Social Media Managers; or the journalist him/herself intervenes in the discussion, which is highly appreciated by users but can put the journalist at risk; or, when the story itself is challenged, the



Gaël Hurlimann and Céline Pétremand, from the Swiss daily newspaper "Le Temps". © DR



editor can sign a response. We never use content moderation companies, which is rare in the French-speaking media landscape. In all cases, Le Temps responds directly to users on social networks.

What are the results of this policy?

Gaël Hurlimann: Le Temps's engagement in dialogue with the user helps to calm the debate on social networks. "Trolls", these specialists in online controversy, have little presence on our social networks because they have noticed that it is generally difficult to have conflictual debates there. On the contrary, the comments collected on our platforms are sometimes so interesting that we have sometimes proposed to their authors to detail their points of view and sign opinion pieces that we have published. ■

Le Temps's engagement in dialogue with the user helps to calm the debate on social networks.



Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organization which provides information to populations faced with crisis, empowering them in their daily lives and as citizens. Through our work, millions of people in war-affected countries, post-conflict areas, humanitarian crisis and societies in democratic transition have access to media that speak to them and give them a voice.

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