

## **Building an Online Dissonance Tool: Transparency Based Tool for Increasing Online Social Network Feed Diversity**

### **1. Background and Objectives**

The Internet has transformed significantly since its inception, deviating from the democratic and open ideals envisioned by its early architects. Online social networks (OSNs), in particular, have become central to modern communication but are increasingly linked to various societal challenges. These include the proliferation of radicalization, offline violence, mental health issues (especially among youth), and the spread of misinformation. Fake news for example, generates billions of dollars in advertising revenue, with significant offline implications for public health and well-being. Moreover, authoritarian regimes have weaponized OSNs to consolidate power, further undermining the Internet's democratic potential.

Compounding these issues, many OSNs employ algorithms designed to maximize user engagement, often at the expense of societal cohesion. These algorithms frequently amplify content that evokes fear or anger, as such emotions drive longer user engagement. This dynamic has been linked to increased societal polarization and radicalization. The United States ranks among the most polarized countries globally, with significant disparities in institutional trust between income groups, much of which is exacerbated by online discourse.

#### **1.1 Context and Relevance to South Africa**

South Africa, a democracy since the end of Apartheid, faces its own set of challenges with digital platforms. The ruling African National Congress (ANC), in power since 1994, is experiencing growing dissatisfaction over national service delivery. This dissatisfaction poses a significant challenge to the ANC's dominance in the upcoming 2024 elections. Furthermore, the rise in political disinformation mirrors global trends, with many South Africans reporting exposure to and initial belief in fake news. The convergence of these factors—algorithmic influence, misinformation, polarization, and declining trust in institutions—creates a fertile ground for societal disruptions. As

South Africa approached a critical electoral period, understanding these dynamics is essential to safeguarding democratic processes and fostering societal trust.

As the Internet and OSNs are global in nature, the project was to design a tool that is responsive to the needs, expectations, and local considerations of cultures around the world with initial focus on the United States and South Africa.

## 2. Project Team

- Bryan Boots,** Henry W. Bloch School of Management, UMKC
- Alex Matlack,** Henry W. Bloch School of Management, UMKC
- Theo Richardson-Gool** University of Bristol
- Oghenere Gabriel Salubi** University of the Western Cape



Figure 1: Bryan, Alex, and Gabriel

### **3. Dr. Oghenere Gabriel Salubi's Visit to University of Missouri Kansas City (Feb.05 – 17, 2024)**

I stayed at the Diastole Scholars' Centre, and was warmly welcomed and given a tour of the facility by Diane Magers. Additionally, Dr. Boots graciously took the time to personally welcome me at the residence. During my visit to the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), significant progress was made on various aspects of the project. The visit facilitated collaborative efforts between Dr. Salubi and the research team at UMKC, resulting in the following key accomplishments:

#### **1. Fine-Tuning of the Research Instrument**

The team conducted further refinements to the research instrument, ensuring its accuracy, relevance, and usability for the next phases of the project. This was a crucial step to enhance the precision of the data collection and analysis processes.

#### **2. Initiation of a Literature Review Paper**

Work commenced on a comprehensive literature review paper, focusing on the intersection of social media algorithms, feed diversity, and digital engagement strategies. This paper will serve as a foundational resource, grounding the project within the broader academic discourse and identifying critical gaps that the research aims to address.

#### **3. Brown Bag Presentation**

Dr. Salubi and the Team delivered a Brown Bag presentation to faculty members at the Henry W. Bloch School of Management. The presentation, titled "*Shaping the Future of Digital Engagement: Insights and Strategy in the Era of Social Media Algorithms*", highlighted findings from the first phase of the project.



Figure 2: Brown Bag Presentation

The presentation was well-received, with faculty members engaging in thoughtful discussions and providing valuable feedback. This platform offered an opportunity to share early insights, and gather diverse perspectives to inform the ongoing research.

#### 4. **Interactive Session on Digital Humanities in LIS Curricula**

In a separate activity unrelated to the project but still part of the visit, Dr. Salubi was hosted by Dr. Spencer Keralis, Head of Digital Scholarship Services at UMKC Libraries and Co-Director of the Center for Digital and Public Humanities. During this engagement, Dr. Salubi led an interactive session focused on incorporating Digital Humanities into Library and Information Science (LIS) curricula.

The session was attended by colleagues from the UMKC library, fostering vibrant discussions on the integration of Digital Humanities principles into LIS education. Key highlights included:

- Strategies for embedding Digital Humanities tools and methodologies into LIS teaching and research.
- Practical examples of how Digital Humanities can enrich the skillsets of LIS professionals.
- Collaborative opportunities to bridge the gap between Digital Humanities and LIS scholarship.

The session was well received, with attendees expressing the practical applications and interdisciplinary potential of Digital Humanities in LIS programs. This event reinforced the importance of cross-disciplinary dialogue and laid the groundwork for future collaborations in this domain.

The visit to UMKC proved to be a productive and enriching experience, advancing both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the project. The outcomes of this collaboration lay a strong foundation for subsequent phases of the project and reinforce the importance of academic exchange in addressing complex challenges in the realm of social media and digital engagement.

#### **4. Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the University of Missouri South African Education Program (UMSAEP) for the financial support that made this collaborative visit possible. A special thanks to Dr. Bryan Boots and Alex Matlack for their warmth and gracious reception during my stay. I am deeply appreciative of Dr. Spencer Keralis, Jeff Rydberg-Cox, and the UMKC library staff for hosting the engaging digital humanities interactive session. My sincere thanks also go to Prof. Rod Uphoff for facilitating the logistical arrangements that ensured the success of this visit. Your collective supports have not only directly contributed to the advancement of our project but has also enriched the broader academic and research environment, fostering innovation and knowledge exchange.