Extraordinary Popular Delusions:

Free Speech, Fake News and the Madness of Virtual Crowds

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Presented to the

37th Annual Forensic Psychology Symposium

American College of Forensic Psychology

April 28, 2022

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Delusions are not differences of opinion. They are not religious faith in something unknowable. Delusions are false, persistent beliefs maintained *in spite of evidence to the contrary.*

DSM-5 describes delusional disorder as the presence of one or more delusions for a month or longer in a person who, except for the delusions and their behavioral ramifications, does not appear odd and is not functionally impaired. A person with a delusional disorder cannot tell what is real from what is imagined. Its main feature is the unshakable belief in something provably untrue. People with delusional disorder often can continue to socialize and function quite normally, apart from the subject of their delusion, and generally do not behave in an obviously odd or bizarre manner—unless they become so preoccupied with their delusions that their lives are disrupted.

There are different types of delusional disorder based on the

theme of the delusions experienced:

* Erotomanic delusions lead people to believe that another person, often someone important or famous, is in love with them.
* Jealous delusions lead people to suspect their own sexual partners of being unfaithful.
* Somatic delusions convince people they have medical problems or physical defects.
* Grandiose delusions are characterized by an over-inflated sense of worth, power, knowledge, or identity. The person might believe he or she has a great talent or has made an important discovery.
* Persecutory delusions. People with this type of delusional disorder believe that they are being mistreated.

It’s possible for people to have two or more types of delusions at the same time. We don’t know exactly what causes delusional disorder. Research indicates genetic, biological and environmental or psychological factors may play a role in causing delusional disorder. It’s more common in people who have family members with delusional disorder or schizophrenia. There is also evidence that brain abnormalities or chemical imbalances may play a role. Stress, isolation, and alcohol or drug abuse may play a role in causing delusional disorder.

The name of today’s presentation is taken from the title of Charles Mackay’s classic work on crowd psychology: “Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds.” When his book was first published back in 1841, Mackay had never heard of social media, of course. He wasn’t a psychologist. But his insights remain useful, and his book has remained in print for almost two centuries. It is a collection of real-life examples of “the madness of crowds,” from investment bubbles to witch hunts. Modern historians have quibbled with some of Mackay’s facts. But his fundamental point remains: Throughout history, millions of otherwise sensible people have been swept up by mass delusions.

Never have crowds been larger—or, it would seem, more easily deluded—than the virtual crowds assembled by social media. Affordable digital technology has empowered people to create and share all sorts of elaborate and unfounded theories. It has freed those who deliberately spread lies from the traditional gatekeepers who once kept the most far-fetched of these ideas off the front pages of daily newspapers or nightly network newscasts.

The U. S. Constitution offers extraordinary protection to forms of speech that, under many other legal systems, would be punished as crimes. Racial and ethnic slurs and virulent verbal attacks on elected officials all are tolerated and, in some respects, encouraged by the First Amendment’s prohibition of government interference with free speech.

With few exceptions, even lies are protected from government regulation, in the belief that more speech, not censorship, is the appropriate remedy and that truth ultimately will prevail over falsehood in a free marketplace of ideas. That theory is being tested by the persistence of misinformation on social media, where some end users are believed to simmer in a toxic stew cooked up by algorithms that shelter them from fact, reality and opposing views. In a fragmented media marketplace, are the theories that underlie the First Amendment still viable?

This presentation will explore the relationship between cognitive function and political beliefs. We will discuss research concerning the relationship between personality type and the distribution of misinformation. We will consider ways in which the fragmentation of media and the business model of social media encourage the spread of misinformation We will discuss proposals for regulation of social media to curb the spread of misinformation and whether or not, given current precedent, those proposals would be constitutional.

**Learning objectives:** (1) Symposium participants will be able to explain relevant U. S. Supreme Court decisions concerning First Amendment protection of misinformation.

(2) Symposium participants will be able to describe the ways in which the business models of social media affect the spread of misinformation.

(3) Symposium participants will be able to summarize relevant research on the ways in which personality and cognitive function affect the spread of misinformation.

**Curriculum Content:** Analysis of the ways in which legal protections of free speech, the business models of social media, and personality traits and cognitive function contribute to the spread of misinformation.

**MCLE:** The presentation will provide relevant education to attorneys seeking a deeper understanding of the First Amendment as it applies to social media and the ways in which research on personality and cognitive function might contribute to the evolution of the law of free speech.

**Relevant references:**

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