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The Front Page of The Internet: A Media Effects Tetrad Analysis of Reddit

Introduction

You've probably seen the image a million times. A happy child sits down to watch the Saturday morning cartoons as their father sits in his chair reading the newspaper while a beaming mother is whipping up some delicious homemade food. This image can be seen on many advertisements primarily from the 1950's, as well as the subsequent advertisements that try to play on the nostalgia that the image evokes. Things are often painted as simpler back then. The man worked, the woman cooked, and the child could play outside freely without fear of falling unto harm. Of course, there was also a Cold War, A Korean War, major Civil Right upheavals, and numerous other ugly things that images such as the one described conveniently leave out of the picture, but those things interfere with the idea of an "innocent era". Everything in the picture is meant to represent an age long gone, but out of everything, it is the newspaper that feels the most antiquated. While today television, radio, and the family unit all look much different than they would in the 50's, they can all usually be found in their new forms in most households. On the surface, it might seem as though the newspaper is not included in this list, and it could be

argued that this is the reality as smartphones and laptops have almost entirely replaced them. However, one site on the internet has become something of a successor to the idea of the daily paper. It's name is Reddit, and intentionally or not, for many people it has become their daily source of news. Reddit is a social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website that was founded in 2005 by Steve Huffman, Alexis Ohanian, and Aaron Swartz, college students at the University of Virginia. Reddit is composed of countless communities called subreddits that each fixate on different topics, which can be anything as general as movies to things as specific as traditional Irish dishes. Everything that is posted on these subreddits are either "upvoted" or "downvoted", a like/dislike system that determines how much exposure a post will get. Uniting all of these subreddits is the r/all page, in which all of the most currently upvoted posts of the day are featured. Everything from cute dog pictures to breaking global news have been featured on the r/all page, which Reddit advertises as the "front page of the internet." This essay will explore Reddit through the lens of the Marshall McLuhan's Tetrad Model and show how it Enhances, Retrieves, Reverses, and Obsolesces.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan was a highly influential media philosopher who predicted many aspects of media and even the internet well before they happened and coined terms such as "the medium is the message." His tetrad system attempts to show 4 different aspects of a piece of media or medium and how they simultaneously affect the world around them. The tetrad asks four questions: what does the medium enhance, what does it retrieve, what does it reverse, and

what does it make obsolete. All four of these criteria occur at the same time instead of happening one after another.

Enhancement

Reddit enhances our comprehension of events going on in the world around us. I personally first encountered the site around 2015 in order to gain news about a new video game that was set to release that year. From there, I slowly encountered more and more of all the different things Reddit had to offer, and began to browse through it more. As I did, I began to see how the amount of differences in opinions on the site was innumerable. On the front page, you could find literally thousands of different comment chains below the posts where people would argue with each other, often doing so in a crude manner. Doctors, lawyers, bricklayers, policeman, vets, liberals, conservatives, marxists, and people of every color and race all gave their input, and the amount of “upvotes” or “downvotes” they received depended many different factors, most notably how many other like minded people saw it.

Retrieval

Reddit retrieves the idea of a daily newspaper. The nuclear family image of the father sitting down and reading the daily paper has just about disappeared from today’s society in the traditional sense, but Reddit has given this concept a new form. Just like how the biggest news stories like Pearl Harbor or JFK’s assassination would take up the most importance on the front page, things such as the Capital riot, George Floyd protests, and Presidential debates would take prominence at the top of the front page of Reddit with the most upvotes. However, just like how crossword puzzles, job listings, and haikus could be found in the newspaper, Reddit’s front page is often filled with pictures of dogs, uplifting stories, and art.

Reversal

When pushed to its limit, Reddit can become anything, reversing its intended design as the front page of the internet and instead become numerous movements that have both tremendously good and bad consequences. Due to its reliance on user generated content, Reddit has had numerous controversies involving some of its numerous communities. One recent controversy centered on the subreddit r/WallStreetBets, where users with varying levels of financial “expertise” discuss stocks and option trading. The subreddit is rife with jokes and crude humor and endless inside jokes parodying what they perceive to be the way Wallstreet operates. Earlier this year, a few keen eyed members of the subreddit initiated a “short squeeze” on the video game company Gamestop and drastically inflated its value, which caused waves on Wall Street.

Obsolescence

Reddit obsolesces blogging sites like Tumblr. Everything from art to discussion forums can be done on Reddit, and with less restrictions.

Evaluation

Reddit is a site with endless possibilities for good, and stands as the best place to to compare different biases against one another to find a common middle ground and make more informed choices. However, it also home to various communities of hateful, harmful users who have been linked to radicalizing many youths, with the recent Capital riot having ties to different conservative and 2A (gun right) subreddits.

Conclusion

While certainly living up to the front page of the internet name the founders originally devised, Reddit has grown into something entirely unique. Even people who are not typically susceptible to cult influence can find themselves falling prey to extreme radicalization, and socially isolate themselves more in real life. However, countless charities, suicide prevention groups, and political activist groups also make their home on Reddit. I have had my worldview drastically opened from my time on Reddit, and it has helped inform a large amount of my current beliefs. However, I also try my best to keep Reddit on a leash of sorts, and routinely try to limit the amount of time spent on it. At the end of the day, I believe social media still needs to be less important to us than the real world around us, Reddit included.

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