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Misinformation, Disinformation, and the Twitter-Sphere

An interview with Joanna Geary,
Senior Director of Curation, *Twitter*

TARA LOCKHART AND JOANNA GEARY

In this interview, a prominent journalist and social media leader discusses current trends in disinformation, machine learning/AI, corroboration of truth, and the tools that professional journalists (and educators) can use in our changing media landscape.

Tara Lockhart: Welcome, Joanna Geary. I know that you've had a long career in news, particularly at the intersection of technology and journalism. Currently you are the Senior Director of Curation at Twitter, leading a global team; previously your journalistic career spanned both *The Birmingham Post* and *The Guardian*. You are also the founder of Hacks/Hackers London, part of a global movement of journalists and technologists. I love the way this group frames its mission: "Our members work with code, build tools for news-gathering, start companies, write and record stories, crunch data, break news, subvert distribution, study audiences, share knowledge, chase baddies, and chat." I love sharing knowledge, but chasing baddies is really where it's at.

Before we get started, I also want to let readers interested in how curation is different from moderation know that they can check out Joanna's full answer and further resources on Twitter (pinned to @JoannaG). The short version: curation does the opposite of moderation; instead of taking down content, curation pulls meaningful, useful content to the top (the tools Explore tab and @Twitter-Moments can help you see curated content). Interestingly, Joanna addresses the difference in content provided by algorithms in her pinned Tweet about curation and her role at Twitter, writing:

Complex heuristics and machine learning algos have a hugely important part to play in how content is distributed on any social media platform. They always will. Unlike humans they can scale really well and social feeds wouldn't work without them. But some important things—e.g., choosing things that explain (and don't just provide a hot take about) what's happening; compiling a narrative; judging the impact of a conversation; deciding the ethi-

cal/cultural context of a Tweet—are still better done by skilled humans. Our work is always going to be a mix of algorithms and humans—an ongoing assessment and balancing between precision and recall needs.

Joanna, it's so nice to chat with you. I'd love to begin by hearing what informs your current work, or what has informed your history of that work around misinformation and disinformation. How have you encountered both in your professional career?

Joanna Geary: A real inflection point for me happened around 2012. My background was as a traditional newspaper reporter who found value in doing news gathering on social media pretty early on. One of the stories I worked on early in my career was the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech. As a result of being the young person in the newsroom who was familiar with social media, I ended up going down that track for my career. I ended up heading up the social and community teams at *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom.

It started around this time that there was video and imagery appearing on the Internet that wasn't necessarily what people thought it was. There were hoaxes, for example. People were being increasingly called out. There began to be much more of a conversation around fakery on the Internet. I was really concerned about this trend in general, and I was also concerned that we should have some sort of capability within *The Guardian* of specialists who could use open source investigation tools to help them to gauge the authenticity of content. This prompted me to begin working with Claire Wardle, a researcher and journalism trainer, who went on to start First Draft (<https://firstdraftnews.org/>), which is a very well-known organization focused on misinformation in journalism.

Lockhart: Yes, First Draft has some great resources for teaching both introductory concepts about information and ethics, as well as specific, global research that might aid teachers in the disciplines (as an example, First Draft has a few case studies on mis/disinformation around vaccines in countries like the Philippines and Pakistan).

Geary: Yes, developing educational tools like this is key. That was our first step as well: to develop an online training course. Actually, I asked Claire if she could develop an online training course, and she said yes. And then she did all the work, for not enough money, to deliver this training course for *The Guardian*. The goals were focused on trying to figure out when something didn't ring true with the imagery, what metadata you could use: just trying to expand people's toolkit to help them look at content on the Internet critically

I guess that was the big inflection point where my involvement came from: developing from "I'm kind of interested in this stuff or kind of aware of this stuff" to "this is really important, and I should formalize it into a skill set."

Lockhart: From your current perspective as Director of Curation, what has changed over the last five years in terms of tools that are available or new challenges that have come up?

Geary: There are certainly new challenges. I would say that a lot of the tools are not dissimilar. In the past five years, there have been some that are useful in terms of checking images, and some techniques have improved. I think actually the most useful thing has been the wider awareness within the journalism community of fakery, and it being much more of a specialty to be the one who can corroborate content online or use content online to corroborate sources' stories.

For example, Malachy Browne, who is at *The New York Times*, has been working very closely with Rukmini Callimachi, their correspondent who follows ISIS. He works on vetting open-source information to corroborate or to disprove stories.

Lockhart: Yes, I'm pulling up his bio, and it provides a perfect example of what you're talking about. Here's the description of his work/division:

Visual Investigations is a new form of explanatory and accountability journalism being pioneered at The Times. It combines traditional reporting with more advanced digital forensics that may include collecting and analyzing cell phone videos, satellite pictures and other imagery, social media posts, police scanner audio, and 3-D reconstructions of crime scenes.

Geary: Malachy came from an organization called Storyful (<https://storyful.com/>), which generated many people who have this skill set to support their journalism. Having more people with this training has really helped. But we need more! There are many more collaborative projects and tools out there now that help journalists to share information.

Lockhart: It's interesting to see these genealogies of training that emerge as information ecologies become more complex and varied in their motives. I didn't know about Storyful as such a training ground; they have some terrific resources on their webpage, including a 16-page whitepaper on mis/disinformation and lots of resources about understanding social media.

Geary: To your point about complexity, the challenges now are that mis- and disinformation campaigns are much more coordinated. I think that's a primary concern, and of course the technology that can be used for disinformation purposes continues to develop. Just as journalists are becoming more savvy, those coordinating disinformation campaigns also continue to become more savvy, particularly through developing strategies for how they communicate and how they organize. Anyways, it's an arms race. It's complicated.

Currently, there's technology that now provides the ability to generate a video showing someone who was never present or part of that video. It's frankly terrifying. There are a lot of questions around new

technology that can reconstruct lifelike video and imagery in a way that will make it very hard to distinguish what's true and what's not.

Although obviously video and imagery can be used for misinformation, from a journalistic perspective video or images are actually really useful because they give you clues, since they still have to show physical space and the people involved. But if you could recreate that image or video using a computer, that's where it gets really scary.

Most of this conversation is around “deep fakes”: artificial intelligence that can synthesize a human being and superimpose that image into videos. You might be able to see a politician at a dodgy party that they shouldn't have been at—because they weren't at it. Deep fake technology provides a way of being able to place them there. Challenges like those around manipulated media continue to come down the line and are really difficult to combat.

Lockhart: That is terrifying. It makes me want to ask you, given these realities, from your vantage point, what are the key practices, perspectives, and approaches that people need in this climate? And if there's a way to think about how that connects with schooling or educational experiences—where people can be exposed to how to think or create content or, you know, view content in such a way that they are not being taken advantage of—what ideas come to your mind?

Geary: This is a very complex question, first of all because the obvious answer is to be more suspicious. However, the emotional response tied to taking a suspicious approach all the time is also problematic, since it can result in believing nothing.

Instead, the one thing I would really, really hope we could teach people to do more is to take the emotion out of disputed stories; to learn to recognize their own emotional reactions to them and to use that as a basis for questioning. Normally, if something is untrue, it's untrue because it is attempting to stimulate someone's emotional responses in some way. We are all biased by the nature of being human. We cannot absorb all information, all viewpoints, and all concepts of empathy all in one go at any one time; we're not God.

We have to learn to select our responses, identify and lift up that knowledge: to be able to, in an unemotional way, stand aside from it and question it—question our reactions to things. I think before even thinking about the information, or an approach to that information, we need to have a better understanding of how we ourselves react to information. It is much more about our own emotional response system than it is about information.

Lockhart: That makes a lot of sense to me, and it connects quite a bit to what Jennifer Hofmann told us about using her own emotional responses to discern if something is propaganda or clickbait. She gave us some strategies that she uses (see Hofmann, this collection).

If you were imagining a primer on how to do that, perhaps questions to use to recognize that in yourself and kind of pull yourself out of that moment, what would those questions sound like?

Geary: Oh, that's really interesting. My approach would always be to go to a website that you know holds different viewpoints to yourself. Then consider: How does that make you feel? Can you describe the feelings that you feel? What response does it make you want to have? The first step seems to be to learn to articulate that response.

Then I think it's to try and put that emotion in a box. Read the article again. Are there any lines in that article that you can now see that aren't related to emotion, or could be accurate or not accurate? It's difficult to explain, but it's the attempt to read the article again, trying to be disassociated from that emotion and asking yourself how that changes your perception of the article. What sort of research would you want to do as a result of that exercise? What are your real questions?

Lastly, I would recommend flipping this activity and doing the same thing with a source you trust. See what happens when you try this with your favorite news brand. Trying to see the results through this perspective is a strategy I use often. It's a sort of cognitive behavioral therapy approach that allows us to pay attention to the emotional responses we get wrong or those that are prompted by mis- or disinformation. We need to learn how to put our own responses in a box. Give it a day. Become familiar with how we respond and understand how it affects our daily lives.

Lockhart: That's super helpful, Joanna. I know that you are running off to lead an all-hands meeting with your team around the world, so I want to thank you for hopping on to share a bit of your experience, perspective, and strategy.

I know I'm excited to dig in more deeply to some of the tools you've mentioned, starting perhaps with the training kits and courses at First Draft, which have both broadly aimed digital literacy resources and quite specific resources for journalists and information verifiers (<https://firstdraftnews.org/training/>). Storyful also has interesting white papers on mis/disinformation and social media in their Thought Leadership section: <https://storyful.com/resources/thought-leadership/>.

Finally, I know our readers might be interested in the ways that journalism activist organizations like First Draft are helping citizens around the world think about, recognize, and combat mis- and disinformation in response to the #infodemic caused by the coronavirus. There are many resources for journalists, students, and the public alike, and even a subscription email list about disinformation. A first stop might be this public guide to navigating the coronavirus pandemic: <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/too-much-coronavirus-information-well-help-you-separate-the-helpful-from-the-harmful/>.