

Online Violence to Real Violence: Misinformation and Disinformation on Meta

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Misinformation and disinformation spread on social media are relatively new but pervasive issues, fueling political polarization, racial bias, hate speech, and violence. This brief will examine how online algorithms perpetuate political polarization, specifically within the company “Facebook,” and how these issues can be addressed through internal company policy implementations.

II. OVERVIEW

Misinformation and disinformation online are issues that have reshaped our global information system. Technology has evolved into a critical functional building block in our society, giving rise to sharing platforms like social media. It is a tool that tightens our global information network by exposing us to an overload of opinions and self-reporting, and primes our minds to an overload of information that we struggle to process as true or untrue.

Facebook is by far the social media platform with the most users. No other social media platform comes close to Facebook in usage (Pew Research Center). Every user can be viewed as a data point, collected and analyzed by an algorithm. Facebook collects data, including phone numbers, race, gender, private messages, and addresses, to feed its bad actors can exploit this data and run rampant. Hence, this paper investigates how Facebook’s data access policies, lack of oversight, business model incentives, and transparency issues contribute to this algorithmic spread of misinformation.

A. Relevance

The platform Facebook now plays an outsized role in shaping political opinion, reinforcing ideological echo chambers through the use of opaque algorithmic reasoning. The issue directly affects electoral integrity, public health decisions, and norms.

algorithm. However, without proper regulation,

Research by the MIT Media Lab indicates that false information spreads 10 times faster than factual reporting on Facebook. Despite this, Facebook has refused to maintain a team of civic fact-checkers and update its algorithms. This issue is especially relevant in the current political climate of democratic backsliding, rising political polarization, post-COVID health information, and election integrity. (Pew Research Center)

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The role of the media in influencing politics has long been debated, but it has intensified with the rise of the World Wide Web. The rise of personalized ad targeting and content

has particularly highlighted problems in recent years regarding privacy policies, Facebook, and the role of the federal government.

Facebook began its role as a neutral platform, founded by a group of Harvard college students in 2004. Its mission, as self-described by Mark Zuckerberg, is “a place to connect the world.” Because it framed itself as a tech platform and not a media company, it was allowed to avoid accountability for its actions.

In 2018, the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal surfaced. In 2014, Cambridge Analytica acquired an extensive database of personal

information from Facebook users, enabling the company to micro-target voters and build a database of psychological profiles. In 2016, they commanded the Trump campaign, using tools like bot farms and targeted disinformation against voters. Ultimately, Trump’s campaign ran 5.9 million ads on Facebook compared to Clinton’s 66,000 (Marantz). Following the 2018 revelation by whistleblower Christopher Wylie, authorities shut down the firm, prompting congressional oversight hearings and a federal investigation into Facebook. (Wylie) Since then, experts have said Facebook has been weaponized similarly during the 2016

Philippine Election, the Myanmar genocide, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the January 6th riots.

federal oversight over misinformation pushed by their platform disrupts

However, there has been heated debate and discussion on how exactly to regulate social media platforms to prevent outbreaks of violence. Too much regulation may be perceived as federal overreach into the free market, and regulating hate speech and disinformation could infringe on freedom of speech.



In a historic court case, *Missouri v. Biden*, the federal government was prohibited from exchanging communications with social media companies. To many, this was seen as a victory— the federal government could potentially coerce social media companies to restrict certain types of speech.

Proponents of federal or international privacy law, however, argue that the federal government is within its rights and that exercising control is necessary to effect real change. (Brennan Center)

Additionally, there are vastly different stances on the role of Facebook versus its users in promoting misinformation on its platform. Facebook executives claim that they have made significant progress in combating misinformation by employing independent fact-checkers and adding features like Community Notes. (Facebook) However, whistleblowers like Frances Haugen claim that Facebook “was not willing to invest what needs to be invested to keep Facebook from being dangerous.” Internal documents released by Haugen have shown that although Facebook is aware of the hate being spread on their platform, they “estimate that we may action as little as 3-5% of hate and about 6-tenths of 1% of violence and incitement on Facebook despite being the best in the world at it,” signaling a severe lack of oversight.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholder is, of course, Facebook, and their business model, complicating efforts to conglomerate of platforms under the larger reform it. company Meta. It holds power as a primary actor, with the ability to adjust its algorithmic structures, The federal government is also a stakeholder: privacy policies, and tools. Backlash and potential U.S. lawmakers, the Federal Trade Commission

(FTC), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) can influence online speech regulation, data transparency standards, and cybersecurity policy. Backlash from the public may threaten terms in office, and misinformation may heighten civic distrust and alter election outcomes. State governments also play a role: certain states, such as California, have pushed for more tech regulation, while other states have adopted more conservative policies towards regulation. Civic institutions and public health agencies as a whole are damaged by misinformation on Facebook that erodes civic and institutional trust. Election officials have also been targeted, as misinformation poses a threat to the integrity of elections.

Everyday Facebook users are stakeholders as well; marginalized groups are specifically vulnerable to viral misinformation that may encourage targeted hate speech and political violence. Users may grapple with addiction to the algorithmic model and reliance on Meta platforms for social connection, despite receiving an influx of false information.

The news media is another stakeholder; journalism institutions rely on and compete with Facebook for audience retention and maintenance; the regular spread of misinformation erodes trust in journalism institutions and threatens the industry as it slowly gets replaced by Facebook.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to misinformation on Facebook lies in its potential to perpetuate global instability. Democratic backsliding may occur as continued algorithmic polarization undermines shared facts and figures, fostering voter suppression, skepticism, and extremism. Public safety threats, such as the January 6th riots, are key examples of how online disinformation can rapidly escalate into violent conflict in the real world. This extends far beyond U.S. borders – examples in Myanmar, the Philippines, and India sustain instability and expose geopolitical risk. Additionally, Facebook's actions set a precedent for corporate accountability in the tech sector.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because misinformation is not just a local or individual problem, but an international crisis that impacts civil institutions, it is imperative that nonpartisan intervention takes place. The benefits of such intervention include, but are not limited to the following:

- 1) **Preservation of Democratic Institutions:** Curbing misinformation can help the integrity of functioning democracies, and a well-informed public is the cornerstone of a functional democracy. Public safety, civic health, vaccine dissemination, and election integrity are possible benefits that can preserve and maintain trust in democratic institutions.
- 2) **National Security:** Misinformation is often than not spread by foreign adversaries. Russian interference, bot farms in India, and outsourced foreign actors to destabilize U.S. society through misinformation on social media.

Implementing policies to prevent this potential exploitation could increase national security.

- 3) Consumer Protection: Misinformation can lead to users being vulnerable to potential phishing scams and online scams. Users deserve transparency and safety from manipulation on platforms that monetize and collect their data, and a fixed policy on these data rules can benefit consumer protection.

Facebook's Oversight Board, as detailed by Frances Haugen, is meant to function as a centralized court for content moderation. However, this structure has failed to work against misinformation, has limited enforcement power, and has no say over algorithm design or profit incentives. For Facebook specifically, there has been a lack of accountability and avoidance of change even in light of tools like the oversight board and the fact-checking functions. (Haugen)

Outside of Facebook, there have been state,

national, and international policies that have attempted to curb misinformation. The EU Digital Services Act mandates annual systemic risk assessments, third-party audits, and algorithmic risk reviews. It also gives researchers access to the platforms and their data to investigate systemic risks. (Haugen)

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act is essential to note in the discussion of tried policy; this is a foundational law of the internet that provides immunity to online platforms from liability for content posted by their users. It has come into scrutiny in recent years as some believe it should be amended to keep up with the changing landscape of the internet. (Brannon, Holmes)

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Mandate for algorithmic transparency

Prioritizing algorithmic transparency through “algorithmic auditing,” as proposed by Harvard Public Health researchers, is a possible solution to heightening misinformation. Third-party risk audits are necessary safeguards to hold social media platforms accountable, and have not been instituted yet in local or national law. (Ghosh, Dipayan, and Joan Donovan)

Changing recommendation algorithms

There is strong evidence that opting into healthier algorithms like the ones pushed at BlueSky and civically minded alternative platforms that don’t rely on a master algorithm, but on individual algorithms. However, changing algorithms undercuts businesses' incentives and may suppress legitimate content. (Carothers, Thomas, Wong)

Reducing data collection and targeted ads

Data privacy protections can be used to reduce the impact of microtargeting, or data-driven personalized messages, as a tool of disinformation. I recommend the downsizing of microtargeting, which can primarily be affected by privacy protections. However, this carries potential high economic costs for political campaigners, tech and ad companies, and small businesses that rely on social media for communication channels.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have outlined the history, stakeholders, risks, past policy, and potential policy solutions to the problem of misinformation spread on the social media platform Meta, detailing the tense interworkings of free speech, economic activity, and algorithmic bias. The most

probable and culpable solution is a mandate for algorithmic transparency, where audit and third-party safeguard frameworks have already been established by researchers and suggested for implementation.

Despite ethical and institutional barriers and debates, it is key that misinformation online is tackled, be it through governmental mandate or private policy shifts that prioritize transparency. Although social media platforms are not the sole sources of information nor the leading causes of it, strong evidence has revealed that algorithms distort and intensify these rifts, and perhaps can be fixed through more governmental oversight and specific mandates to promote accountability, transparency, and trust in the private tech sector.

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