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Social Media Platforms and Responsibility for Disinformation

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Abstract

Researchers are paying closer attention to the rise of disinformation on social media platforms and what responsibility, if any, the companies that control these platforms have for false information being spread on their websites. In this paper, we highlight the recent growth in concern regarding online disinformation, discuss other works regarding the use of social media as a tool for spreading disinformation, and discuss how coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media platforms are used to spread propaganda and lies about current political events. We also evaluate the reactions of social media platforms in combatting disinformation and the difficulty in policing it. Finally, we argue the point that governments should not have the power to regulate the content of social media platforms except in cases where said content is actively illegal or could be categorized as a type of speech that is not protected by the First Amendment.

Disciplines

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Abstract— **Researchers are paying closer attention to the rise of disinformation on social media platforms and what responsibility, if any, the companies that control these platforms have for false information being spread on their websites. In this paper, we highlight the recent growth in concern regarding online disinformation, discuss other works regarding the use of social media as a tool for spreading disinformation, and discuss how coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media platforms are used to spread propaganda and lies about current political events. We also evaluate the reactions of social media platforms in combatting disinformation and the difficulty in policing it. Finally, we argue the point that governments should not have the power to regulate the content of social media platforms except in cases where said content is actively illegal or could be categorized as a type of speech that is not protected by the First Amendment.**

Keywords—disinformation, social media, hate speech, censorship, free speech

I. Introduction

Social media is an incredibly powerful tool. It allows people to communicate with others from across the globe, meet people they would never have met otherwise, witness current events as they unfold in real-time, and exchange their ideas and thoughts with thousands of other individuals. It also has the potential to do great harm. Social media facilitates the rapid spread of information, but on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, the information that is being spread can often be misleading or outright false. Much of the increased focus on the rise of disinformation on social media platforms like the ones listed above can be attributed to recent events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine. While the concept of disinformation has existed for as long as language, the increased reliance of many individuals on social media as their primary news source has provided a breeding ground for its spread. An entire market emerged dedicated to spreading information that was false but played towards the viewer's existing beliefs. As the article Combating Disinformation in A Social Media Age puts it: "Given the low cost of creating and publishing content online and the vast reach of social media platforms, several alternative media sources have emerged recently, often spreading false and/or highly biased claims" [1]. These sources exist to create distrust in traditional media sources, and their output ranges from biased articles to conspiracy theories and pseudoscience.

Disinformation in the internet age is also a very lucrative business for the platforms on which it is hosted. In the article "The Economics of "Fake News," the authors outline the economic incentives that exist for platforms like Facebook and Twitter to allow these sources of disinformation on their sites. They state, "Facebook's business model is based on users' engagement, interaction, and content consumption. The more users read, click, share, and engage with content, the more profit Facebook receives" [6]. Since many social media platforms generate revenue by providing advertising space to other companies and brands, alternative media sources whose "fake election news stories on Facebook attracted more views than top stories from major news outlets" [6] would provide additional profits for the sites that host their content. It should be noted that despite the financial incentives at play here, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have created policies that are aimed at helping prevent disinformation on their sites. Facebook has invested resources into using machine learning to identify disinformation, as well as "Making it as difficult as possible for people posting false news to buy ads on our platform through strict enforcement of our policies" [7]. In December 2021, Twitter created a policy banning the spread of disinformation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. The policy prohibits posts that advance a claim of fact, are demonstrably false or misleading, and are likely to impact public safety or cause serious harm [8]. However, many people still believe that further action should be taken against those who spread disinformation on these sites, which is a task that is far more complex than it looks at first glance.

II. What Counts as Misinformation and Disinformation

With the current age of the internet, it's often hard to discern what might be disinformation, misinformation, or real information, as many people are able to say what they believe and rally others behind them. Disinformation constitutes "false information created with the intent to do harm," while misinformation is described as "false information spread without the direct intent of doing harm" [9]. This means the difference between them is someone's intent to actually spread lies versus someone's intent to spread what they think is the truth. Misinformation can be a product of both disinformation and a misunderstanding of real information, as the minds of people's opinions can be easily swayed by quickly skimming through some articles or tweets and coming up with their own ideas of what may be happening in the world. Some examples

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of disinformation can be found in the current information war happening along with the war in Ukraine, as the Russian government creates and spreads false information and incorrects real information to help with their war effort. On the other hand, some of the worries over COVID vaccines and advancements in 5G technology can be considered misinformation because they commonly come from a place of worry and concern from those who consume a lot of disinformation on the topics. Overall, the spread of both disinformation and misinformation is detrimental to our society, and it harms our ability to spread real and important information.

III. ROLE OF ONLINE DISINFORMATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Disinformation spread through social media is not an issue exclusive to the United States. Platforms like WhatsApp have gained popularity in countries such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, and many African countries. These platforms are just as susceptible to disinformation campaigns as any other. In the paper "Images and Misinformation in Political Groups: Evidence from WhatsApp in India," researchers found a spike in false posts during major events, including terrorist attacks, protests, and national elections. In one case, "during the India/Pakistan conflict, over 2000 instances of misinformation images were shared on a day" [2]. It also found that the types of disinformation posted to the site came in two major categories, real images being used out of context (old pictures said to be the result of current events) and doctored images (a fake BBC poll or doctored screencap of a news program). Another paper found that WhatsApp played a large part in the disinformation spread about the Covid-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe, with users spreading false information about virus transmission rates and promoting bogus cures. While the effects of a few dishonest posts on social media may seem harmless at first, this problem can sway the views of large portions of a population, especially when "the social network accounts for close to half of all internet traffic in Zimbabwe" [3]. Presidential Elections are easily the largest target of disinformation campaigns, such as the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election. A paper by Recuero et al. found that coordinated disinformation campaigns led by party leaders were used to cast doubt on the safety and veracity of electronic ballots. This also introduces us to the spread of disinformation by public figures, effectively a form of propaganda, as" Bolsonaro himself and other political leaders that supported him often said publicly that the electronic ballot was untrustworthy" [4]. While people in countries like the United States may feel as though online disinformation may be limited to a select few "first world" countries, this issue is one that concerns countries around the globe.

IV. VULNERABILITY TO DISINFORMATION

When discussing the distribution of false or misleading posts on social media, it is important to discuss just how susceptible people are to it. This issue might have a smaller impact on our lives if individuals were capable of correctly identifying and disregarding information that was shown to be false, but unfortunately, this is not always the case. A study conducted on the rise of fake news articles spread through social media during the 2016 US Presidential Race suggested that "the average adult saw and remembered …1.14 fake news articles from our fake news database" [5]. In a survey conducted by the study, 1.14

participants said they had seen one of the fake news stories and believed it. The belief of false stories spread on social media can change based on the person's education, and party affiliation. There are also concerns that people may be more likely to believe false stories that come from people they know, as social media tends to facilitate. In addition, coordinated efforts are made by propaganda outlets to target those individuals (the elderly and uneducated) who are more likely to take these instances of disinformation as true.

In addition, Satirical news sites have skyrocketed in popularity in the past few years, but as disinformation grows along with them, some people seem to think that they may add to the ongoing problem of fake news and misinformation. Satire news is literally fake news but with a different role from typical disinformation: comedy. When one sees a satirical article, it catches their eye with a crazy headline, thumbnail, and story, but it's assumed that it should be seen as an obvious joke and shared for laughs. However, sometimes people mistake these articles as real news articles and use them and the information gained from them as the basis for their misinformed opinions, "But now more than ever, Americans are worried about their ability to distinguish between what's true and what isn't and think made-up news is a significant problem facing the country." [11]. Sites like the Onion and the Babylon Bee consistently post real-looking articles on real-looking news websites with the assumption of brand recognition, as they both are openly satirical news sites. However, if the article falls on the wrong person who doesn't realize the site itself is satirical, then it could cause them to believe what they read. While most would point out that it takes common sense to realize that the articles posted on those websites are fake, some of these articles aren't too far from being realistic. Along with that, there is a large population of older generations that use the internet primarily for news and might not get the joke or the idea of a satirical news site in general.

V. HOW DISINFORMATION AFFECTS FREE SPEECH

Free speech is probably one of the most important aspects of our society. It is incredibly important that we have the ability to give our opinions about our government, its policies, and the people who run it. However, the constant problem of disinformation threatens the future of free speech as it creates a negative association with it and false information disguised as facts or opinions. As more and more disinformation spreads, people are becoming less interested in the concept of free speech as it applies to our society. "But increasingly, scholars of constitutional law, as well as social scientists, are beginning to question the way we have come to think about the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech." [10]. While it's reasonable to consider disinformation "part of free speech," allowing it in our society can have impacts, such as doubts about actual free speech. This might or might not lead to future generations becoming less interested in having free speech in their societies leading to a more controlled information age. On the other hand, allowing disinformation to thrive in a free-speech society could make it nearly impossible to spread real information in a sea of fake information, leading to a fractured information age.

VI. CENSORSHIP CONCERNS

In addition, the topic of censorship is a common one when addressing the rise of disinformation in online platforms. How does one determine whether something is disinformation or simply an opposing viewpoint? Who or what is allowed to make the final decision in these matters? The first question is the more difficult of the two to answer. Disinformation is defined as information that is inaccurate or false, whose providers are aware of its falseness. However, language is complex, and there are more ways to get someone to think a certain way about something than just lying. The way a story is framed or the omission of key details and context can certainly be used to create a narrative without spreading false information. But this new definition would be incredibly hard to enforce, so I suggest that any policies against disinformation should be limited to false statements. As to who gets to have the final say? While some might suggest that governments should take action against social media platforms that do not sufficiently combat the spread of disinformation, that itself can be a daunting task. As discussed before, online disinformation can come from a variety of sources. These sources can range from individuals who are simply misinformed to large networks of 'bot' accounts that seek to create a certain narrative surrounding a particular event. Platforms like Facebook have billions of users, and millions of posts and photos are uploaded each day. Moderating this gargantuan amount of information becomes a daunting task, even for large companies. Some platforms have taken to automate this process, filtering out rule-violating messages, as your email filters out spam, or allowing users to report disinformation, but false positives are a possibility with these systems and millions of posts that would be classified as disinformation slip through. Even large organizations like Meta do not have enough manpower and resources to combat this spread. Concerns about government overreach are also prevalent. Many point to countries like China, where most social media platforms are replaced by state-friendly ones, and discussions of certain events or posts critical of the government are banned by law. This is an amount of power that no government should have, and I believe that social media platforms should create their own policies and outline plans to help stop the spread of online disinformation, as well as take more steps to ensure existing policies are enforced.

VII. WHAT ROLE SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT TAKE TOWARD HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION?

Disinformation is often most dangerous when it is used for the purpose of inciting violence or promoting hate speech. While social media providers do have both the right and the responsibility to protect their products and consumers from hateful rhetoric and violence, the same may not be true for the government. Many people reference the US constitution and argue that the government has no right to interfere with free speech, even if it is harmful, for the simple reason that a single person can define what is and isn't harmful. Typically, offensive rhetoric is protected by the first amendment, including rhetoric that is spoken by known terrorists or hate groups unless, of course, the rhetoric calls for harm or violent action against someone or someone's property [12]. The argument could be made that the government of today is different from that of the country's inception and that the government should take a

harsher role in preventing hate speech, but the question must still be asked of what lies in the store for the United States if the government maintains the right to censor and persecute those that they see as pushing harmful rhetoric? The country could be on track to finding itself in a similar position to countries like China and Russia, which regularly censor the voices of the government's critics. However, while censorship of government criticism is very real, so is genuine terroristic speech and hate speech. It stands to reason that the government should have some right to take action against those that threaten violence. Given that a face-to-face public threat of violence can be prosecuted, it stands to reason that a threat over social media can be prosecuted as well. The right medium between the government not overstepping its bounds but taking necessary steps to protect its citizens from violence is likely met by the government signing into place federal law that explicitly defines the difference between legal hate speech, which would purely be offensive rhetoric vs. illegal hate speech which would be any rhetoric intentionally inciting violence or making threats toward others [12]. In this way, the government will lack the means to prosecute free speech but will still maintain the right to take action against violence and criminal acts orchestrated or threatened on social media.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while social media has brought people together more than ever before, it has also become a place where bad actors can spread disinformation to an audience that is less likely to fact-check information in general and even more so if it conforms to their existing political beliefs, regardless of where audience members stand on the political spectrum. Social media platforms that facilitate the spread of disinformation have made efforts to combat it, but there are still many more steps that could be taken. Some might argue those organizations are not doing enough and that governments should step in a create laws against the spread of false information. While this a sensible argument by itself, there are many logistical challenges to stopping the spread of disinformation and reasons to be wary of giving governments too much control over what information people have access to.

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