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Policy Spotlight: Disinformation

Can the EU Stand Up to Russia and China's Disinformation Campaigns?
by Tanya Lim, Technology and Innovation

The disinformation landscape has been evolving. Authoritarian regimes, notably Russia and China, have always been observed to utilize sophisticated techniques, including algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI), and automation to conduct information operations. However, disinformation actors are transforming the field by investing more, taking a longer-term approach, and utilizing incoming AI capabilities. As a result, disinformation has become more sophisticated, evoking emotional responses in order to manipulate the public which makes it increasingly difficult to detect and take action.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has seen an increased number of information operations conducted to exploit the pandemic for geopolitical gains. These show signs of a convergence in the type of disinformation campaigns which indicates that the Chinese Communist Party and Kremlin have been learning from each other. This was seen in instances of narrative overlap, and circular amplification of disinformation in which the efficacy of vaccines and their origins were questioned. The largest difference was China's insistence on a consistent pandemic narrative, whereas Russia focused on its 'firehose of falsehoods' strategy, spreading a broad range of Covid-19 disinformation. This was a large departure from its previous types of information operations employed as Russia traditionally focused on recycling previous narratives, exacerbating tensions in Western countries, and promoting Russian scientific dominance. China particularly focused on its state-specific issues, such as Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan and Tibet, and rarely targeted other countries. Yet, the mutual reinforcement of narratives poses a significant threat to the EU.

Acknowledging the main role of disinformation to sow confusion and polarize society, disinformation has been seen as a pressing issue that the EU needs to resolve as it undermines democracy and threatens the functioning of liberal societies. Thus, the EU has launched several initiatives to combat misinformation. For example, in 2020, the European Commission proposed a Digital Services Act, which aimed to create a safer digital space in which the fundamental right of all users of digital services is protected. In 2021, the European Commission also updated its guidelines to strengthen its Code of Practice on Disinformation between leading social networks, online platforms and advertisers. Finally, in 2022, the European Parliament set up a special Committee on Foreign Interference (INGE2) to identify gaps in its legislation that could be exploited for malicious purposes.

The EU has also worked with multinational organisations and international partners as part of their intervention measures. This includes providing credible public health information, setting up a Covid-19 disinformation task force, imposing sanctions, and addressing the emerging Russian and China threat narratives. Digital platforms, such as TikTok, Meta and YouTube have also increased their efforts to combat misinformation through platform and policy changes, such as taking down inauthentic content and launching partnerships with disinformation organisations to provide credible and reliable information. The emergence of new measures is especially important during high-risk periods, such as the elections, which is undeniably the hallmark of a democracy.

Several of these measures appear to be working well. At first glance, the effectiveness of the combination of ground-up and top-down measures involving participation from the government, civil society and private sector appears successful. These measures include cross-sectoral collaboration to identify threats, enforcement of measures beyond the government into civil society, and the enhancement of citizens' digital literacy and awareness. Moreover, between 2018 and 2020, Facebook and Twitter announced that they had taken down 147 influence operations in total.

However, pushback from private companies appear to inhibit the performance of the EU's proposed measures. The 2018 Code of Practice (CoP) required digital intermediaries to provide monthly reports on the code's application and their progress in the fight against disinformation to avoid sanctions. However, the ineffective monitoring systems for enforcing compliance and unclear judgement criteria for the firms' results caused misalignments between the companies' progress and the Commission's

goals. This resulted in constant criticism from the Commission about the companies' insufficient progress in increasing the transparency and trustworthiness of websites hosting ads. Rising tensions between technology companies and the EU resulted in an uneasy relationship, causing companies to be unwilling to continue 'supporting the good independent efforts to track disinformation and understand its impact' by being a signatory to the CoP and limiting access to information to researchers.

To improve its existing measures, the EU needs to implement a more robust methodology by introducing a more defined lexicon in disinformation, since each threat requires different instruments in response and it is difficult to aggregate the effectiveness of responses, as seen in the example above. For example, the term 'disinformation activities' should not be used interchangeably with 'foreign influence operations' as disinformation activities comprise a broader set of activities consisting of hostile activities and it is hard to reconcile these different elements. It is important to treat the manipulation of the information space as a distinct threat instead of simply distinguishing between foreign and domestic disinformation, as this would lead to a perspective that is too narrow since foreign influence flourishes on existing ground built in the domestic sphere.

Moreover, the EU should establish stronger ties with media companies. With the emergence of new platforms, countermeasures by some technological companies may not be effective as disinformation actors may move across different platforms and implement complementary strategies. Thus, the EU should look at tools to deal with other platforms including closed messaging systems such as Telegram and Facebook Messenger. Moreover, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the complex media landscape as an opportunity for businesses in which various types of media actors push disinformation, manipulation or sensationalism for profit. The media landscape should be closely monitored, yet the EU needs to remain open to extreme ideologies as there are always media outlets that provide more ideologically extreme information for a certain audience. Censorship of this type of content would raise concerns over the ethicality of free speech on the internet.

Overall, the EU's measures are still a step in the right direction. While the EU's current measures seem to have the capacity to react to disinformation, it could improve on predicting upcoming trends and issues by enhancing its strategic approach to information warfare. This could consist of: (i) understanding how the adversary thinks; (ii) developing, refining and aligning transatlantic regulatory approaches; (iii) creating a coordinated and information-sharing whole-of-society mechanism for information integrity and resilience. The enhanced coordination between the EU and its member nations would leverage members' expertise, and the improved communication would ensure that the EU's ambition of combatting disinformation would be achieved.

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Harnessing the Power of Social Media during Crises
by Anu Rachel Joseph, Global Health

The domain of healthcare is one in which access to knowledge can determine whether a life is saved or lost. Hence, the age of information which has democratised access to knowledge in the broadest sense yet, has given people the opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding of their own healthcare needs. Yet, this widespread access to information is not without its pitfalls, particularly in public health, as anyone who has ever looked up their symptoms on the internet can attest to. This is less because of the intentional spread of inaccurate information, and more because of the sheer volume of possibilities presented to you when probing anything via the internet, an experience vastly different from the single diagnosis and explanation provided when approaching a healthcare professional directly.

With the ability of easily sharing both knowledge and opinions, the rise of social media platforms over the last decade has created an added dimension in the information domain. One no longer has to seek out the plethora of information out there as before, as it is instead presented to you directly, simply by participating in social media. The Covid-19 pandemic brought to light both the advantages and the disadvantages of social media platforms as a medium for the accessible and rapid spread of crucial information during a crisis. The accessibility and widespread use of social media globally makes it a powerful tool for relaying rapidly changing information, safety protocols, and evidence-based knowledge during a healthcare crises. However, various reviews also identified the role of social media as an equally potent force of spreading misinformation during the pandemic, as summarised by the systematic review of reviews on Infodemics published by the World Health Organization (do Nascimento et al. 2022). The review by do Nascimento et al. identified four studies that reported on the proportion of health-related misinformation available on social media which ranged from 32% of posts related to vaccines to 7% of posts related to medical treatments (Suarez-Lledo and Alvarez-Galvez 2021). Additionally, 20% to 30% of YouTube videos regarding infectious diseases were found to be at least partially inaccurate or misleading (Tang et al. 2018). This was found to have a negative impact on public health and wellbeing by increasing vaccine hesitancy and decreasing access to healthcare.

Cases in which the evolving nature of science and the reporting of statistical errors in experimental results is utilised to attack evidence-based knowledge and healthcare best practices, such as against vaccines during a pandemic, are especially dangerous. This is because statistical analysis of results and honest reporting of all data is crucial for ensuring the robustness of the scientific process and spreading a biased narrative around this data leads to fearmongering, creating distrust towards science and healthcare in the population. Another important aspect to consider is that the algorithmic suggestions on social media and for search engines such as Google are built on the posts that people engage with, hence interacting with misinformation regarding public health could lead to related suggestions, potentially creating an echo chamber and increasing individual access to misinformation.

The best way to tackle the spread of misinformation in public health would be directly through healthcare professionals (do Nascimento et al. 2022). When healthcare professionals are well informed and supported during a healthcare crisis, they are can pass on accurate information and become a trusted voice within their communities. Legal policies must also be formulated to utilise social media directly to combat the spread of misinformation and guide people towards following the best healthcare practices. This can be done by requiring social media platforms to run factchecks on post related to healthcare or by informing people of potential misinformation before they access or engage with certain posts. All posts related to healthcare during a public health crisis can also include direct links to governmental or WHO issued health advisories (Pian, Chi, and Ma 2021). Furthermore, by identifying which social media platforms are most widely used nationally, awareness campaigns can target these platforms to ensure that people have access to accurate information that they can

critically engage with, to overcome the echo chamber effect. These strategies tackle misinformation by amplifying the most accurate, evidence-based knowledge available at the time, while still protecting individual freedom of speech and expression instead of resorting to censorship.

Hence, we see that not all hope is lost, especially as eight reviews by Infodemics also identified positive outcomes of social media usage during the pandemic by increasing awareness and healthcare compliance (do Nascimento et al. 2022). In the future, we need to harness the strengths of social media to raise awareness and amplify the right message so social media can become a powerful tool that empowers populations to have a greater understanding of their own healthcare needs.

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