How do you and your co-founder(s) make important decisions related to your organization? Feel free to include an example of a specific decision.

Please explain (750 characters):

I was a solo founder of my organization; my cofounder is a school friend and volunteer at the org. who has done so much work that I was thrilled to offer a cofounder position when we formally filed for 501(c)(3) status. I am responsible for growing the organization, being the public face of our work, all research and engineering development and business development (even as a nonprofit we contract with newsrooms and fact-checkers). The decision for raising funds from foundations, applying to grants, hiring a full-time staff member, and so on are initiated by myself, confirmed by Dhara, and I do the groundwork to take them forward. Dhara leads day-to-day operations for project-specific teams at SimPPL and ensures we deliver on commitments.

## Where have these funds come from?

We would like to know more about who you received these funds from. To the extent you are comfortable, please list any large institutional donors which provided you funds. If your funds were provided by customers, family & friends, or other individual donors, please let us know— but you do not need to list individual names.

Please list the source(s) of these funds:

Contract from Deutsche Welle Akademie

Grant from Wikimedia Foundation

Award from Google Cloud

2 Awards from MIT

Award from NYU

Award from Goethe Institut

Contract with Tech Global Institute

Contract with NEST Center for Journalism

The rest were personal fellowships for Dr. Swapneel Mehta from the Center for Tech and Society, MIT, Google Research, and Amazon.

## Your Vision for Impact

This section aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem you're addressing, your proposed solution, and the community you serve.

*Each response should be no more than 1,000 characters.*

## Describe the problem your work seeks to address, the root causes of this problem, and why it still exists.

The global majority is the last to benefit from technological advancements yet extremely vulnerable to online harms arising from them. Online disinformation caused over USD 80B of losses even before GenAI reached mass-adoption. Fact-checkers are slow, rely on "authoritativeness", and lack distribution without platform partnerships. The issue is that the public lacks auditing tools for online information and civil society lacks the capacity to build them. AI is touted as a solution whereas models perform extremely poorly on "in the wild" Indic data because of their multilingual nature, lack of standardization, scripts, and phonetic diversity (KJ et al. 2024). It is also hard to deploy multistakeholder solutions. Lower levels of digital literacy mean only 20% of the population exposed to widespread political deepfakes recognizing what synthetically generated media is (Blackbird AI). In fact, despite forewarnings, people still base their decisions on deepfake content (Clark et al. 2024).

## Describe the approach you will take to address this problem and the specific activities involved.

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My work prioritizes the development of responsible computing tools to rebuild trust on the social internet. I am a trained data scientist receiving my Ph.D. investigating the causal effects of interventions to mitigate the influence of misleading claims online. I build practical systems protecting vulnerable communities online, intervening on actors, behaviors, and content. Through my nonprofit, SimPPL, I do this by training a number of undergraduate students over a year-long "fellowships program" in machine learning infrastructure, data engineering, and social science research. We elevate their work by partnering with global newsrooms, civil society, and governments to deploy tools we build into practice. Our products draw on rigorous research from our team and the scientific community, operationalizing it into open-access systems for academics, newsrooms and fact-checkers in India, Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Germany that allow them to scale their impact to millions.

## Tell us about the community and the people you seek to serve with this work.

My work focuses on the youth in India, Bangladesh, and Mongolia developing auditing systems to allow them to access safe and reliable information. We focus on the sources of reliable information (newsrooms), influence of misleading information (fact-checkers), and consumer-facing mitigations (whatsapp tiplines). India: work with leading newsroom producing over 7,000 articles and 40 videos daily, identifying misleading claims in influencer videos that affect tween mental health. Also support nonprofits in rural India digitize health information via offline data collection by frontline health workers. Bangladesh: Support low-resource languages, using AI to digitize Whatsapp conversations in the dying language spoken by the Marma community, working with their indigenous queen. Mongolia: Work with the only international fact-checking network member, NEST Center for journalism, developing social listening systems to accelerate their fact-checking efforts with responsible AI.

## How will the lives of the people in the community improve because of this work?

Our work makes safe and reliable information available to users and empowers youth changemakers to deploy research into practice. SimPPL's projects are led by 200+ undergraduate mentees hailing from Tier II / III institutes across India. They spent a year in our award-winning fellowships program, published 8+ research papers at top venues, presented 3 at Stanford and are advancing cutting edge research and tooling w/ 20+ partners. Two teams are now mentoring graduate capstone projects at MIT Sloan and NYU Data Science delivering tools to the UN. In Mongolia, we accelerated fact-checking well enough that the NEST center is continuing our work on a paid contract. In Bangladesh, the leading daily with 8M readers gave us a front-page feature and Meta issued a takedown of the 600 adversarial threat accounts with 100M views. In India, we are set to reach over 6,000 families this year with our digital health records work and literacy efforts, presented at the World Bank, feat. by DW, UNESCO.

We are one of the most successful Indian educational programs till date, only the 3rd Indian team (and only non-IIT team) to win the international exploreCSR challenge from Google and inaugural Responsible Computing Challenge from Mozilla. In India, we are the only non-IIT team to win their prestigious exploreCSR grant, and inaugural Mozilla Responsible Computing Challenge for our work.

## Your Idea

This section explores the innovative aspects of your work, its potential for systemic change, and your vision for a more equitable future.

*Each response should be no more than 1,000 characters.*

## Think about the systems that affect the issue you are addressing. What kinds of power are influencing these systems? Give examples of how your work resolves the root cause(s) of the issue to create a more equitable system.

Education sells in India, because it is about branding, access, and the idea of a "better future" that parents overindex on and programs grossly underdeliver. On the other hand, government and civil society languish from a lack of talent because working for them is underpaid and unsupported. SimPPL connects youth at underserved institutes that lack access to adequate computing, mentorship, and knowledge of societal issues with organizations that lack trained staff and technology to solve sociotechnical problems, via a paid fellowships program with expert mentors. Notably, we bring real-world problems to the table in all their complexity for students to appreciate the challenge organizations face. Uniquely, our staff are equipped with experience from running fully-remote organizations pre-COVID, building student communities running strong (since 2017), in India and the US, and they share a cultural knowledge of the challenges both these parties--the youth, and the orgs.--deal with.

## Imagine a future where people of all identities (race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, caste, tribe, etc.) have equal opportunity to thrive. How did your vision help lead to this future? What changed in your community as a result?

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In an AI-generated future, I envision a society where we have created enough opportunities for each student to have the ability and resources to play a leading role in resolving complex sociotechnical challenges focused on online safety. Most students in the global majority, especially at non-Tier I institutes, have to overcome a number of personal constraints in additional to the usual professional challenges arising from resource constrained academic programs, before they can even think about the impact they want to have. Females aren't allowed to attend hackathons because their families are not okay with overnight events; others may not be permitted to leave home for higher education; yet others lack stable electricity, Wi-Fi, and a laptop they could use; and many travel multiple hours a day on crowded trains to get to college. SimPPL acknowledges and helps deal with such concerns, providing a well-resourced, remote-first companion to academic programs at any engineering institute.

## Explain how your work builds upon existing models and is new and innovative - either in your geographic area or in your sector of work.

The Trust and Safety community is extremely West-centric, and a woeful lack of performant AI/ML systems in Asia and Africa has led to efforts like Omidyar, Ford Fdn, Columbia Univ.'s Trust and Safety Tooling Consortium to attempt to incentivize civil society changemakers. But we lack industry-trained professionals; T&S efforts are limited, only just starting out with a first-of-its kind course at Stanford and NYU, and scattered US/EU fellowships. Activating the Indian community, we empower talented students with industry-equivalent skills in ML, social media, and online safety where they are the domain experts by practice. They lead partnerships; user interviews, problem identification, traveling onsite, and only then building technical solutions. The results speak for themselves: we are only the 3rd Indian team (and only non-IIT team) to win the international exploreCSR challenge from Google and inaugural Responsible Computing Challenge from Mozilla, as well as awards from MIT.

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## Consider peer organizations in your field. What organizations have inspired your work? What aspects of their work do you want to build on? How will your approach be different, and why is it needed?

Our team has mentored students since 2012 (Lumiere Education (Harvard/Oxford), Make a Difference, Lions Club) where we taught 30+ students for multiple months. We are inspired by Google Summer of Code, a platform connecting students with open-source projects for programmers. SimPPL grew out of DJ Unicode (djunicode.in), and Shalizi Stats (bit.ly/shalizi-stats) a software engineering training and research mentorship program that I launched in 2017 advancing such "project-based" programs into "problem-based" ones. Uniquely, we go beyond POC projects: we empower students by showing them real problems that need solving, inspiring them to deploy systems that civil society needs. We have a 2:3 gender ratio and like other programs, our students have gone on to pursue Ph.Ds at top institutes, research at MIT, and FAANG companies. But because of our problem-based partnerships approach, our former fellows jump through red tape to continue volunteering with us and solving thorny societal issues

## Describe why you are passionate about this work and community.

I was a smart student that didn't work hard enough to get into a Tier-I college. I had a chip on my shoulder, and found my way through internships at IITs to became friends with the dean at IIT-Bombay. I later convinced my dean to let me graduate 6 months early to work at CERN on ML and Physics. I've been lucky to find great mentors so I am driven to give back and support 4 million students annually to make it through the Indian engineering system starting with my alma mater, where I am now on the Board of Studies. I came from a family of limited means but saw how the US education system created opportunities for every student to have outsized impact. I decided I want to do the same for every student I mentor, especially those incredibly talented students in underserved communities back home. Since 2017, I have taught students every weekend, starting Unicode, Shalizi Stats, the NYU AI School, and now SimPPL (all still in existence).

## Describe how you shift power to the community and how you engage the community into the design and strategic decision making of your work

I'm a builder masquerading as a postdoc, hoping to find a way to convince B-school academics that impact beyond papers is important. All this is informed by experiences where my students and I work on thorny issues dealing with online harms, misinformation, and crumbling trust in democratic institutions. I host 1:1 calls with every member each month in order to align the partnerships with their personal goals. We prioritize impact while meeting rigorous research benchmarks and publishing. My work in Information Integrity and AI Policy at SimPPL is inspiring changes where our economics/behavioral sci. focused theory lab has grown from 0 to 20 undergraduates and 3 PhD students who are really interested in pushing for field experiments. Conversely, for nonprofits and think tanks like the Integrity Institute, I share insights & emphasize research rigor resulting in them making me an advisor/tech affiliate and invited talks at UNESCO, Finnish and Swiss Embassies, Knight Institute, T&S Fdn.

## Share an example that showcases your leadership ability to build and manage an organization toward strategic goals.

Treating students as professionals is easier said than done. For those who have never worked in industry, their first internship is usually entirely hand-holding and teaching them the ropes. I was struggling with SimPPL early last year because we had 80+ fellows that needed constant support which I found quite satisfying to provide. But if I prioritized that then I would be unable to focus on developing partnerships with government and civil society nor on publications that we needed in order to scale our impact. It was a tough call to make but after a conversation I decided to hand over day-to-day responsibilities to my cofounder, taking 8 weeks to prioritize partnerships. I found support in my brother, an electronics engineer/PgM who took on part time program management and now is Secretary at SimPPL. But because of this we published 8+ papers, and won 6 partnerships with the UN, NYU, MIT, Jagran Media (Indian top publisher), NEST Center (Mongolia), Spreeha (Bangladesh).

## What organizations do you currently or hope to partner with to amplify your impact? How have or will you mobilize others to join this movement?

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We have letters of support from the UN Peacekeeping Forces and with the Office of the Secretary General to advance partnerships for our work with them, including a partnership with Tech Global Institute (Bangladesh) focused on rebuilding trust in democracy and protecting vulnerable communities online. We aim to scale our tech-driven auditing systems for users to audit the information they see online. Our students are expanding https://parrot.report built to investigate cross-platform coordinated networks having collected over 750 million posts (and counting) from 8 alt and mainstream social media platforms. Deutsche Welle and Jagran Media are partnering to advance our work in Mongolia and India respectively, creating conversational systems for deliberative dialogue, towards understanding the drivers of trust. Beyond students, we are mobilizing industry professionals to volunteer partner-specific consulting hours creating a channel for civil society to benefit from expert assistance.

**SCRIPT:**

**My name is Swapneel Mehta and I am a postdoc at BU and MIT working on platform governance research. I have been teaching students every weekend since 2017 sharing what I learned working on AI and ML at Adobe Twitter Oxford Slack and CERN.**

**Students are an overlooked and underappreciated resource and if empowered with the right resources, they can do wonders! A student that barely knew of US politics a year ago is now mentoring MIT Sloan MBA students in one of the first longitudinal research studies into Donald Trump's alt social platform, Truth Social, approved by Sinan Aral, the professor leading MIT's Initiative on the Digital Economy. Another is presenting at Stanford to OpenAI's former Trust and Safety Lead, and a third (in high school!) is working for the UN Peacekeeping Ops. Honestly, as a mentor, these students teach me more than I can ever teach them so I am privileged to keep doing the work that I do to help them drive outsized impact in the world!**

My work focuses on the youth in India, Bangladesh, and Mongolia developing auditing systems to allow them to access safe and reliable information. We focus on the sources of reliable information (newsrooms), influence of misleading information (fact-checkers), and consumer-facing mitigations (whatsapp tiplines). India: work with leading newsroom producing over 7,000 articles and 40 videos daily, identifying misleading claims in influencer videos that affect tween mental health. Also support nonprofits in rural India digitize health information via offline data collection by frontline health workers. Bangladesh: Support civil society to take down online threats on Meta. Use AI to digitize Whatsapp conversations in the low-resource Marma language, working with their indigenous queen. Mongolia: Work with the only international fact-checking network member, NEST Center for journalism, develop social listening systems to accelerate their fact-checking efforts with multilingual AI.